

amrita pritam



A
SLICE
OF
LIFE

A SLICE OF LIFE

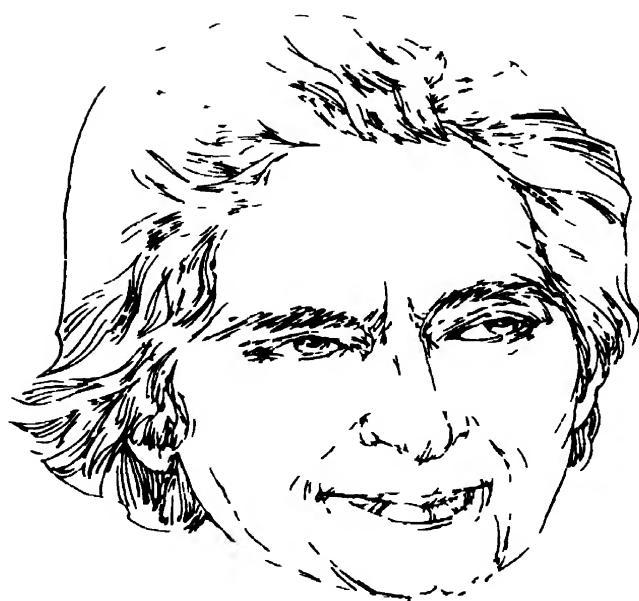
SELECTED
WORKS

Amrita
Pritam

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who have translated my works.

Poems

First 24 poems by Charles Brasch (A poet from New Zeland),
No. 25, 26, 27 by Mahendra Kulasrestha,
No. 28 by Krishna Gorowara and Khushwant Singh,
No. 29, 30, 31 by Pritish Nandi, and
rest of the poems by Hari Sharma.

Stories

“Stench of Kerosene” by Khushwant Singh,
“The Weed” by Raj Gill,
“This is my Cow Sir!” by Manmohan Singh,
“The Watch on the Orchard”
“Karma Wali”
“Chhamak Chhallow”
“Two Women”
“The Third Woman” by Jai Rattan,
“Seven Hundred and Twenty Steps” and
“On Banks and Shoals” by Krishna Gorowara,
“270 Crore Heart Beats” and
“The Other One” by Hari Sharma.
And all the articles are translated by Hari Sharma.

— Amrita Pritam

Introduction:

The Red Thread

Just as time has been divided into two parts. Before Christ and after Christ, I divide philosophy into two—before the inner experience and after the inner experience.

The solution to divide the time came from the west hence the name of Christ came up. If it had come from the East, it would have had a different name. So the division lies in the solution of the problem, rather than any other deeper sense...but the division of philosophy lies in profound meanings.

When philosophy comes in contact with art, one is confronted with literary creation but the difference remains between the creative work before the inner experience and the post creative work....

And the lips of night that once had kissed the forehead of some dream, on the feet of imagination the anklets are tinkling.

The inner experience of the anklet tinkling on the feet of imagination, god alone knows how strong a bond that ties it to the fully conscious mind and with the unconscious mind too. But I can say that to go into the dark depths of time too, is a major step.

The uproar that is made in the name of culture, beneath it, many murky passages lurk where countless lives of men are

entombed and the necessity to look into those dark passages comes from that inner experience.

*"Your culture always borrows from the artificial light
Looks at my sun and abuses
And I am a chamber within a chamber
Everyday I give birth to my sun
And everyday my sun becomes an orphan."*

I can also say that in this inner experience a particular power is there which ignores the hardened dogmas of the bygone years.

*"My sun is sleeping in the palace of clouds,
And there are no stairs, no door, not any window
And the paths that time has carved.
Are too narrow for my feet."*

When Buddhism reached Japan from China it branched out into a separate identity, called "Zen" evolved from the Chinese word "Chan". And it is said that the Chinese word "Chan" was created out from the Indian word "Dhyan".

In Zenism the love of a woman was non-existent. But with the coming of Saint "Ikkue" the shakti of a woman was recognized. Hence he formed a new religion, which he called the 'Red Thread Zen'.

The relationship of a mother and the child in her womb is through the umbilical cord, without which the existence is impossible. It was this relationship of this cord through which Ikkue gave birth to the 'Red Thread', which even after the severing of the umbilical cord, the tie remains in the psychic sense with the mother force, and symbolises the eternal force with the cosmic womb.

I can say that in the literary creation this Red Thread is connected with some inner agony, so much so that the outside world becomes a symbol.

*"Today the sun was somewhat uneasy.
It threw open the window of light"*

*Then it shut the window of the cloud
And went down the stairway of darkness.*

*Beads of sweat hung on the brows of the sky;
It undid the star buttons
And took off the moon shirt.
I was sitting in a corner of my being,
Your memory came to me
Like a thick and bitter smoke
From a wet log*

*And with it came a hundred thoughts
As red sighs of fire
Come from a dry log,
Both logs I have quenched now.*

*The embers of years are scattered
Some dead, some still aglow
When time tried to sweep them up
Its hands came up in blisters."*

I think that it is the connection of the Red Thread with the inner agony that leads it to that inner experience where multi-dimensional images of it are seen so that the tears of the strangers and homeless fill in one's own eyes....

The country was in such a state that the New Year came something like this :

*"As if a word
Has slipped out of my inner sentence
As if a drop of ink
Had stained my inner faith
As if on the lips of love
A blister has formed
As if from the wrist of culture
A glass bangle has broken
As if from the ring of history
A pearl has fallen.*

Seems that inside us there is a meeting place where the seven streams of consciousness converge. The future of seven is not my imagination, it has been given by the Indian philosophy. In the words of Shri Aurobindo, "Seven folded truth consciousness"... but what is mine is the little experience gained from it.

I had felt a part of this experience when I was writing a novel "The thirteenth sun". It was pure chance that the hero of the book was a writer, who in the story, while writing, leaves his papers on the desk and in a disturbed state falls asleep. Who will then enter the room wake him up and how the story would move ahead, I had not yet begun to think on these lines when tired by writing I fell asleep....

A dream came—the paper on which I had written lay on the desk and suddenly the window next to the desk flew open and a gust of wind scattered the papers lying on the desk all over the room....

Alarmed I got up, still in the dream I quickly began to pick the papers...but what do I see, the papers are all blank and whatever I had written word by word has fallen off from the papers...and those alphabets like black seeds are lying on the floor....

I see—some are lying on the floor, a few on top and some beneath the table. I pick each word by word with my right hand and place it in the left hand. What happens next is that my left hand has become of clay and that too, wet clay. And with my right hand, with its thumb, I start to press those black looking seeds into the clay....

And the words that lay beneath the table I pick with the fingers of my left hand and keep placing them in the palm of my right hand....

I see that the right hand too has turned into the one of clay, of wet clay. And with the thumb of the left hand I press each and every word. Immediately I find small red flowers have sprung up on both the palms. Bewildered and puzzled I stare at my palms, when suddenly my sleep breaks....

One cannot catch the exact moment when the writer enters his

characters and when the character silently invades the insides of the writer.

It was my dream, which on waking I had written in my novel, the dream which had come to Sanjay the character of the novel....

God knows what kind of an amalgam it is—where the writer and the writing merge into one image... and maybe it was the convergence of the many streams of consciousness that once I saw...a staircase leading deep into the earth. Step by step I walk down the staircase. Must have been 100 steps when I see below me a small pond. Reaching it I cup my hands and keep on drinking the water....

The secrets of the earth and the sky are beyond our grasp. It could be the trick of one's own imagination which spins a web of magic around one—It was a moment like that when I saw—I am standing before an eternal shakti and saying—

*Oh God! When every star passing through the galaxy
Comes nearer to your sun
Then understand its the gravity of my longing*

Which is obvious in every star.

For many centuries so much has been written and will be written but only some atoms of the cosmic forces seems to have come in the grasp, enough to stir ones imagination.

This feeling I had expressed in one poem—All these vedic books one sees; from the branches of whose mind, a few leaves or two have fallen....

If all these books are the leaves fallen from one branch, then how green, how rich that branch must have been and what to say about the tree—this imagination is part of one's own capacity. And I think that this approximate imagery is called poetry.

I don't know what this "Red Thread" is. But that much I know that sometimes it takes the inner experience into that dimension where it is beyond the reach of any discussion.

Many times I have written poems in my dream and when I woke up I noted them down on paper. Or I wrote some lines in

my dream and on waking up I added a few more lines. This must be happening with many writers. But there is one poem which I haven't written but I heard it in my dream. As if the lips of air were murmuring. Nobody was there before me but a voice was heard. Listen! This is an epitaph which was written in the past life, on your death.

I don't know who wrote the epitaph, where did I die, but I heard the dirge and its words lingered in my ears. When I woke up, I wrote down on paper—those words were....

*"She was a poem like the rope of the well
She bobbed up and down
And the vessels she filled
She sprinkled on the dried up souls
Like a vessel of water, She overflowed
And the generation of the green leaves of soul continued".*

What is the secret of the Red Thread, I don't know. But once I saw a incident from my past birth which I had been able to describe in one poem of mine—

*Last night...
Walking amongst the ruins
Of my unconscious mind,
I observed the moments...yes moments,
Perhaps while throbbing
Stood frozen in the air,
And their feet turned to stone,
Right there.*

*And then their shadows grew long,
On the backs of stones
Like Moss, clung.*

*On one side, a palace in ruins,
On the other
A broken wall of a hermit's cave,
Each stone my finger tips touched-
Laughed at first...then cried.*

*Oh God! What did happen,
What consciousness
Has just returned from the ruins.*

*My legs and feet feel stiff,
As if from a long journey
Of many births,
In a single breath,
So many periods, I walked.*

*Now I can see the moss fall
From my finger tips
That touched the stones.*

The experience of walking through so many lives many times caught the veil of words. I know within the boundary of the veil the limitless doesn't fit in but whatever the words could absorb, can be called a poem.

*I was there—And perhaps you as well.
Standing perhaps a breath away,
Perhaps perched in the darkness of a vision,
Perhaps moving on a turning point of consciousness,
But that was a tale of prehistoric times.*

*That was our existence, yours and mine,
Which became the first language of the world.
Words were coined to identify me,
Words were coined to identify you,
And they wrote in that first language, their first book.*

*That was our tryst, yours and mine
We slept on a bed of stones,
And our eyes, lips and finger tips,
Became the words of your body and mine,
They then made translations of this first book.*

*The Rig Veda was compiled much later.
When I draped myself with your being*

*Our bodies were turned within in meditation.
Then our limbs entwined like flowers in a garland
As an offering at the altar of the soul.*

*You and I, incense offered at a sacrificial fire
Our names slipped out of our lips
To become a sacred hymnal.
That was a sacred ceremony for you and me.
Religious rituals came much later.*

From me, this literary creation in the name of a long journey—

*“From the roots to the conscious...
From the words to the meanings....”*

I saw in this journey a very big question of our history which for centuries is hanging in the air. In the Mahabharata period when the Pandavas lost everything in gambling and Yudhister putting himself as stake, lost. And when he even staked Draupadi and lost, then Draupadi in the crowded court of Duryodhan asked one question, “Yudhister after losing his own self, what right did he have to put me up as a stake? That moment nobody could answer in the court. Even Yudhister could give no answer and since that time Draupadi’s question hangs in the air.

And it was my mental yearning that in this creations journey, the soul of my creation would be Draupadi’s soul when in a crowdèd gathering feels the need to question the rulers of the time.

And today I would like to call my journey of the consciousness—a journey from Draupadi to Draupadi....

Its a long journey from Draupadi to Draupadi, on whose one end stands Draupadi who is not the cause but the effect, Pandavas are gamblers and Draupadi is a pawn to gamble with.

And on the other end Draupadi is standing who is not the effect but the cause. Not a pawn to gamble away but one who has come to gamble.

This journey I brought out in one of my poems—

*I am the Draupadi of countless rebirths
I am made of five elements
And to all the five I am wedded....*

*In one of my births—I Draupadi
Like a stake, to gamble with
Came to the Kings Court—*

*Even in this birth, the Kauravas are the same,
The same faces—the same dices
And they have laid, the same game.*

*I am the same body from the five elements,
I am the same woman Draupadi
But I am not the stake today
For I have come to gamble.*

*I am made of five elements
And to all the five I am wedded...
The whole of society, the Kauravas, have won
And they make a new move,
Staking all their sovereignty on it*

*With my right hand all the society I lose
With the left the sovereignty.
But the Kauravas in agony exclaim
That the five elements are my five Pandavas.*

*I have arisen from the crowded court
Winning all the five
I am the Draupadi of countless rebirths....*

I think that this is my relationship to the 'Red Thread'. The journey of my consciousness which I can call a journey from Draupadi to Draupadi.

It was this sort of an experience which bubbled on the lips of a poem:

"I have not done any Vuzu—nor any Sajada

*Neither have I come for fulfilment of a wish
May your four lamps keep burning,
I have only come to light the fifth*

*You have given this body an earthen lamp
I had given it fire as a good omen
I have brought you back your trust
May your four lamps keep burning,
I have only come to light the fifth*

— Amrita Pritam

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Fraser

At Midnight

Your memory knocks at my door.

These are not words of song
But drops of sweat on love's brow.

These are not words of song,
They are tears that choke my pen.

These are not words of song:
Wounded silence weeps.

I have paid love every debt
And every debt is to pay—
Why do they never grow less?

Your memory comes with the rest
Bidding life sign this night
The blank cheque of death.

Your memory knocks at my door.

You Do Not Come

Spring is waking and stretching its arms,
Flowers weave their silk threads
For the festival of colours.
You do not come.

Afternoons grow long
Red has touched the grapes
Sickles are kissing the wheat.
You do not come.

Clouds are gathering,
Earth opens its hands to drink
The bounty of the sky.
You do not come.

Trees murmur enchantment,
Airs from the woodland wander
With lips full of honey.
You do not come.

Seasons wear their beauty,
Night sets on its brow
A diadem of moon.
You 'o not come.

Again the stars tell me
That in my body's house
A candle of beauty still burns.
You do not come.

All the sun's rays vow
That light still wakes
From the death sleep of night.
You do not come.

Bread of Dreams

Last night
I dared to eat the bread of dreams.
I don't know how the sky
Came to hear about it.

Big wings heard the news
Long beaks heard the news
Cruel teeth heard the news
Sharp claws heard the news.

The bread was quite naked
Its flavour was quite naked
It had no covering of soul
And no covering of flesh.

One swoop and the bread is snatched away
My hands are torn
One swoop and my cheeks are scarred

On my lips no bread
Only talk of bread.
Nights are black vultures.

Last night
I dared to eat the bread of dreams.
I don't know how the sky
Came to hear about it.

Drops of Light

At the river of light in the sky
The stars fill their pitchers.

Last night a few drops fell on me
And I remembered you—
Image dearer than life.

The blue veil of the sky
Caught on earth's thorny branch
And was torn.

Night passing
Seemed a riddle
I could not guess.

The heart's finger-tips are very delicate,
Moonbeam needles
Pricked them through

Fiery memories burned,
I tried to pull my veil away
But its edge caught fire.

Memory

The sun was rather uneasy today
It opened the window of light,
Then it closed the cloud-window,
Then it descended the staircase of darkness.

Beads of sweat hung
On the brows of the sky;
It undid the star-buttons
And took off the moon-shirt.

I was sitting in a corner by myself,
Your memory came to me
Like a thick and bitter smoke
From a wet log.

And with it came a hundred thoughts
As red sighs of fire
Come from a dry log,
Both logs I have quenched now.

The coals of years are scattered
Some I could quench and some not;
When time tried to sweep them up
Its finger-tips got burnt.

The cooking pot slipped from your fingers
And broke;
We had invited history to a feast
And it has gone away hungry.

A Story of Fire

This is a story of fire
You told me the story;
This is the cigarette of life
The one you lit.

The spark was of your giving,
My heart has been smoking ever since;
Time with pen in hand
Is smiling and counting.

The cigarette took fourteen minutes
To smoke;
To write this
Took me fourteen years.

My body was an unlit cigarette,
It was your breath that gave it life.
Earth is witness
To its constant burning.

The cigarette has burned out,
You inhaled a little
Of the scent of my love,
The rest has blown away on the wind.

Here is the butt.
Throw it away
That my love's fire
May not burn your fingers.

Don't think of what is burned.
Mind the spark in the butt.
Take care of your hand—
Light another cigarette.

The Breeze

How restless my city breeze today
Making restless everything it touches,
Perhaps it has come from your far-off home.

Hot, hot the least breath of its lips,
Perhaps it has gone
The way that every love must go.

Restless, what has it found, what has it lost?
Passing your house
Can it have stopped for a while at the door?

It always blew, but never so intensely,
Perhaps today it felt
The keenness of love that I once knew.

Having suffered every pang of time
It is so tired now,
Perhaps it sat alone and wept.

Feast

Young night is holding a feast,
The stars look like white rice
That she cooks, smiling to herself.

She has brought her wine-jar, the moon.
The sky is drunk with moonlight.
Earth's heart is beating fast,
Flower-guests throng the house of the branches.

What will happen now?
I have no time to ask fate.

Your love has signed
My life's blank sheet.
Now it is yours.

Fate has written a song:
Perhaps it will be sung tonight.

Who can sit under the wishing tree?
Where the fruits of desire grow?
Perhaps I dare taste them.

I heard the wind sighing deeply
But I must go,
Fate is taking me to the feast.

Talk

Come, love, we must talk today.

The feelings that grew
In your heart's ground
You plucked like tea leaves,
Keeping them to yourself
Like green leaves
That you wanted to dry.

In this earthen oven
The sunken fire will revive,
Blow once or twice
And the half-burnt log
Will burn up again
And in the oven
Again the flame of love will rise
And in my body's flask
The water will boil.

Bring the tea leaves.

Like dry tea leaves
The same old feelings
The same old longings.

Put them in the water
And it will change colour,
Take a few hot sips yourself
And let me take a few hot sips.

In the spring of life we could manage without it
But not in the winter.

Come, love, we must talk today

Daily Wages

In a corner of blue sky
The mill of night whistles,
A white thick smoke
Pours from the moon-chimney?

In dream's many furnaces
Labourer love
Is stoking all the fires

I earn our meeting
Holding you for a while,
My day's wages.

I buy my soul's food
Cook and eat it
And set the empty pot in the corner.

I warm my hands at the dying fire
And lying down to rest
Give God thanks.

The mill of night whistles
And from the moon-chimney
Smoke rises, sign of hope.

I eat what I earn,
Not yesterday's left-overs,
And leave no grain for tomorrow.

Silence

I am dry of thought,

An empty pitcher,
Silence sits thirsty
Licking its lips
For the least drop of words.

Love has dug a well
Days strike like spades
Nights pierce like prongs,
The stone years are broken
But nowhere water.

In my empty days
The pitcher is turned down,
Seeing, I cannot speak
For parching tongue
And writhing lips.

Turning its back on life
Breaking its bonds with water
The abandoned well droops,
Chewing earth
And licking stones.

Happiness

Somewhere I heard a voice
Far away
A voice exactly yours.
My ears sighed deeply.

Happiness
Innocent as a child
Ran towards the voice
Bare-footed.

The first thorn was convention
The second thorn was reputation

The third thorn was security—
Risks like many splinters

Pulling out the thorns
Rubbing her feet
Wiping off the blood
She limped every step of the way.

Puzzled then, she stood
Hesitating,
The voice was certainly yours
The eyes were certainly those of a stranger.

A sharp thorn of conflict
Pricked her sole so deeply
That with all the nails of her wisdom
She does not know how to pull it out.
Her whole foot is swollen,
The poison is spreading.
Puzzled she sits there
Innocent happiness weeping.

Image

Stone God
All your senses are frozen
And never melt,
Your blood has been sleeping for centuries
And still does not stir.

Women burning in beauty come
To bend low
Before your dark rigid limbs,
They touch your stone feet
With silken fingers
And bow vivid heads
Intoxicated with life.

The honey smell of their breath
And the trailing smoke
Drawn up from their incense
Do not rouse you to feel.

Delicate figures without number
Moonlike beautiful faces
Narcissus eyes
Incline before your dark figure
Like snakes
That coil round the sandalwood tree.

Your lips are still thirsty
For this adoration
After centuries.
Generations of youth withered away.
Soft young arms that adored you
Faded, dried up.
Cups of life in thousands
You drank
But are still thirsty.

I, a small part
Of that offering
I, your devotee
Will burn for a while
And burn out,
I, a small part
Of that offering.

Do you know how many
Skins of touches
Have formed on your feet
And how many lips have shriv. 'led up
Kissing your feet?

Baffled, I surrender,
My virgin lips
Kiss your feet that thousands have kissed.

The Scar of a Wound

When they forced my mother's womb
I came as every child must come;
I am the mark of that blow,
Violation bade me grow;
In my country's agony
They scared my mother's brow with me
When they forced my mother's womb.

I am the curse of man today,
Time's wound cries out in me;
Sun and moon hid their light
And stars fell dead in thick night
When they forced my mother's womb.

I am the scar of that wound
That in my mother's body burned,
I am the shame she nursed within,
The stench and loathsomeness of man,
The sign of torment she must bear
As her body's lasting wear.

Strange fruit ripened on the tree
Of Independence—look and see!
When they forced my mother's womb.

The Scar

The house of love
Seemingly in good repair,
But last night suddenly
A crack opened.

A visible scar
Is left on the wall.

This scar is whimpering now
Now this scar is crying aloud
This scar is growing stubborn now
Now this scar is kicking with hands and feet.

It stares at me
Knowing its mother's face,
It stares at you
Knowing its father's back.

It stares at the world
And begs for a cot to sleep in
And it asks the laws of the world
For a small toy to play with.

Mother, say something,
That I may take the scar in my lap,
Father, say something,
That I may sing a song for the scar

Though I sit here in darkness
How can I tell the scar to sleep?
With sunlight overhead
Where can I hide the scar?

A Lump of Clay

A handful of man
And a handful of woman
Kneaded together—
Two hands to form the body
And mould the face.

Only a milky smell
Comes from it,
This lump of clay,
And a small sound, nothing more.

It has not yet learned
The play of language.

It wears the first birth-hue,
It has not yet put on
The hundred shades of the world.
Its soft feet
Are still pure
Of the dust of the world.

From the common ocean
It has scooped up no handfuls
Of mine and thine.
Its thoughts still go free
Of the ties of relationship.

This will not last:
The clay must be baked in the ovens
Of religion and morality.
Baked, it will bear the marks
That many have set upon it,
Each of its feelings overlaid
By the repeated curse of convention.

It will have to suffer
Parents, race, country,
Learn to favour its own people
And despise others.

A soft lump of clay
I will have to learn
The secret of the hardness of stone.

Knowing the secret of stone
Like big stones
And becoming one of the big stones itself
Sooner or later it must break somebody's head.

The Breadwinner

My breadwinner
I have eaten your salt
And I must obey the salt
As my father willed,
I am of his blood
And must obey his blood.

Before I can speak
Your bread speaks.
I am ready to speak
But my words are weighed down
By ... weight of bread.

My breadwinner
Working child
Follows working father
And I can refuse
No work.

All other work
My hands can do
And this too.

My breadwinner
I am a doll of flesh
For you to play with,
I am a cup of young blood
For you to drink.
I stand before you
Ready for use
According to your will
I grew
And was ground
And kneaded
And rolled out,

You may bake me
In your oven
And eat me like bread;
I am only a scrap of bread
And you are only lava
To cool or grow hot as you will.

As I stand before you
Take me in your arms
Plunge me in the lava of your body
Kiss me
Fondle me
Do with me what you will,
My breadwinner
Do not ask for my love, only make me yours.

Frenzy

When religion goes to people's heads
Steel is sharpened
Tongues grow cruel
Poisoned by black snakes of hatred.
Red blood in the veins
Turns dark
Lips beautiful to kiss
Foam.

The goddess of death
Comes by night
To drink blood from scattered skulls.

Beaks of vultures
Eat the flesh of dead and dying
And men's eyes cannot tell
Other women from their own.

Sheep of every flock

When they see a different fleece
Taking a scrap of flesh
Or a thread two yards long
Convert the stranger by force
And drive it to join their own flock.

So they grow virtuous
They serve religion
They raise the flag.
In bright daylight
Or in pitch-dark night
Steel is sharpened
And innocent children

Delicate women
Strong young men
Are human beings no longer
But animals for sacrifice.
When religion goes to people's heads....

Heat of Fire

Cold my tender hands
And cold my soft feet
Let me warm myself at the fire of lust
I want to feel its red flames
On my limbs
And try to bear this unendurable cold.

I know the sun of love burns warm
But in my sky
It is forbidden to rise

Or perhaps it does not dare
To pierce the clouds of convention
And shine out.

If I warm my hands at the fire of lust

I know I will blacken them
But I know I shall be warm.

And perhaps the day will come
When someone with blackened hands
Will be able to shake convention.

The flames are tall
Beautiful
Red

Coals are scattered
Ashes blown about
Falling on society's venerable head.

Not Today

I always do the right thing
But not today,
I always do what people ask
But not today—
No!
In Nilchander valley
Where nothing grows old
Nothing changes
Flawless
Starless
Stormless
The blood in my hot veins is rebellious
I want to see a storm
Passionate as my blood
Giant hills
Demonic stones
I want to see the clouds
Breaking their heads
And I want to see deep gulfs

Like the gulfs of sin
I want to see the clouds
Fall into those gulfs
Their limbs shattered
I don't like pure blue sky.
I always do the right thing
But not today

I know society has a loud voice
But my purse is full
I can buy the voice;

I know religion will be outraged
But I shall bow my head for a while
And it will be appeased.

I know something will cry in my soul
But psychology will find me an explanation
And keep my soul quiet.

I always do the right thing
But not today.

A Limping Shadow

A long line of trees

As if stones had hurt their bare feet
As if they had twisted their ankles
As if their knee-caps were broken
As if their shoulders ached
As if every branch limped as it grew.

Each new soft branch
Is fastened to a dry stick
As if its wrists were sprained
As if its elbows had been fractured,
Steel wires are wound round the branch

As if to tie back its waving hair.

Soft are the leaves of trees
Soft the flowers of the womb;
When the gardener is very cunning
The tree is full of knots;
As a branch grows step by step,
Step by step its shadow limps.

Let us bend low
Let us fold our bodies up small
And sit in the thin shadow of a tree
And when a small flower comes
To crown the tree's head
We shall weep for the flower.

New Year Greeting

As if from the comb of my thought
One tooth had gone,
As if a piece had been torn
From the shirt of my mind,
As if a speck
Had pricked the eye of my faith,
As if the fingers of sleep
Had caught a burning coal of dream.
So the new year has come.

As if a single letter
Had slipped out of my name,
As if a drop of ink
Had stained my perfect confidence.
As if the lips of time
Had sighed deeply,
As if a tear had come
To the eyes of mankind,

So the new year has come.
As if a mark had appeared
On love's fair skin,
As if a glass bangle had broken
On the arm of culture,
As if a pearl had fallen out
Of the ring of history,
Earth has received
A sad letter from the sky,
So the new year has come.

Knot

The fabric of lips is worn out
But the knot of our breath remains.

It is the knot of two beings
It is the knot of our souls
It is the knot of two scents
The knot of our deep sighs.

It is the knot of the darkness of bodies
It is the knot of the light of bodies
It is the knot of two prayer
The knot of two altars.

If by chance we are sitting together
Let us talk of the sea of love
Let us talk of the ship of our life
Let us talk about ourselves, the seamen.

We know what will be said
We know what they intend—
What the earth will advise
And what the sky will say.

If by chance we are sitting together

Let us talk of the beauty of faces
Let us talk of the strength of feet
Let us talk of the softness of arms.

Let us talk about lasting colours
Let us talk of thoughts that dwell in the mind—
We must shake off the suffering of love,
The dust of these paths.

My Night is Awake

My night is awake
But my thoughts of you have gone to sleep.

The tree of the sun is still there, shining,
Someone has broken the rays, the branches.
The sky was hung with moon-lace
Someone has torn it off.

Why did dreams promise
To come in sleep?
Stars are left waiting outside,
The sky has closed its doors.

It was your memory
Which sewed up the wounds of my love,
Today I have pulled out the stitches
And I give you back the thread.

How painful it is,
From the holy book of my love
I have torn out the page,
The page of waiting.

Earth is sad,
The sky has sighed;
There was a caravan of flowers—
It had to pass through the desert,

There was a scent of wheat—
Gunpowder has drunk it;
We believed in peace once,
Now our faith is being sold.

Centuries are complaining,
About the World;
'This was the season of love,
How could you sow hate?

This is the blood of man
Putting man to question:
How could Christ's pure lips
Kiss the cross?

What a night it was!
As it passed unthinking
The moon-flower
Was crushed underfoot.

The sun-horse neighed,
The saddle of light fell down,
Walking on for ages
The traveller wept.

Lover of love and beauty
Resolve to win back
The faith that was yours once
However distant it seems.

Medals

Valiant men of my country!
Valiant men of your country!

They all go to shed blood
They all go to sever heads
Though it is a different matter

That the heads are never their own.

Human beings have their corpses,
God doesn't have His.
When human beings falter
And a part of God dies
There is no foul smell.

No-one loves anyone.
There is no danger
Of having a lover,
And no danger
Of having any pain.

They feel insulted by those
Who have a longer line,
They try to equalise it to their own
By rubbing its extra part.

So the victory is complete
And complete is its celebration.
Time smiles .
And adorns their breasts
With medals of impotent bravery.

Resigned

It has been happening since ages.

Time bribed
And purchased
Pages of History without its knowing;
It changed some lines
Rubbed off others
Whenever it wanted to do so.
History felt irritated and depressed
But forgave the historians.

But today it is sad.
A hand unfolds its cover,
Tears off a few pages from it
And stitches fake ones in their place.

History casts a glance at it,
Quietly comes out of the pages
And stands under a tree
Smoking a cigarette.

And He Wept

Imperialism

A rare royal plant
And the human race
Growing like weeds.
The ruler's orders:
As much as one can carry out
People's suffering:
As much as one can bear.

Socialism

A temple of the human race
A man's value equal to a brick's
The bricks may be set
Where the temple needs it
Or the contractor wishes

Its three great sins:
The feeling of pain,
Tender thoughts
And individual freedom
One who frees himself of these
And sells the gold, his soul,
Can please the goddess of power.

Rule of Religion

Mercy of God
 And seeing
 Speaking
 And thinking
 The only prohibitions

Burden
 Of innumerable questions
 On the shoulders of man

But religion is kind
 It buys every question
 If one can wait for the answer
 (till eternity)

And if one feels hungry
 He can always eat
 The stale God-bread
 Can keep some of it
 For his next life too
 (With of course due thanks)

Democracy

Abuse growing in abundance
 One can eat it as much as he likes
 And fill his bucket for future use

He may even chew its cud
 In his spare time

Nine Dreams and the Annunciation*The First Dream. Initiation*

Tripta woke up with a start,
 Smoothed her bed-cover.

Covered her shoulders, with a veil, the colour of a blush.
 Looked at her man
 And said, hesitating like:

The crease on the coverlet;
 On such a winter's night I stepped into the stream,
 It was bitterly cold but the water warm
 And no sooner my body touched,
 The water turned into milk,
 And I bathed in milk: the river is magical.
 What is this river in Talwandi?
 What is this dream?
 A moon swam in the river,
 I put the moon on my palm, took a sip
 The water mingled with my blood
 And the same moonlight quivers in my womb.

Second Dream: Vision

Seven colours in the vessel of Spring
 I mix: no word comes to the lips.
 This being of clay is meaningful
 Only when someone makes a nest in its hollow
 What's this worship, this penance.
 Do mothers see their gods in their wombs?

Third Dream: Realization

The cravings of unripe pregnancy
 The restless heart.
 I sit and churn, and butter begins to form,
 In the pitcher I put my hands
 And see a ball of sun.
 What was this consummation and
 What was this union?
 What was this dream of spring?

Fourth Dream: Contemplation

From me to my womb

This distance of dreams
My heart in ecstasy, my being afraid
What is this summer harvest of wheat
Which when I am out to winnow
My winnower becomes a Salver full of stars.

Fifth Dream: Fragrance

A strange voice
On a dew-washed night
Divine melody over land and sea
Was this the song of love and illusion?
Or was it the hymn of divine creation?
Some heavenly fragrance:
Or the odour rising from my navel?
I trembled with fear
I followed the sound into the woods.

What was this sound, this music, this dream?
In what proportions was it mine?
Like a frenzied doe
I strained my ears against my womb.

Sixth Dream: Changing Horizons

Like a bud bursting into bloom
Like the dark yielding to the dawn
She was suddenly awake in the month of June.
My being once the water of some lake.
I just saw a swan flutter its wings.
What was this dream?
I feel
The fluttering of the swan wings in my womb.

Seventh Dream: Magical Fruit

A coconut in my lap
I know not from where it came.
As I see no one around me.

I cracked the coconut.
 People came to partake of its kernel
 I poured the juice of the unripe fruit
 Into a vessel.
 No ritual, no superstition.
 People took their share; it still remained.
 What was this coconut? What was this dream?
 How long stretch the threads of dreams?
 I touched my breasts and the juice of the coconut
 Oozed out.

Eighth Dream: Illusions

What is this August? What the magic?
 Every thing seems to have gone awry
 Who will stitch clothes for the womb-child?
 This basket, these spools of thread: what are they?
 As if last night I had spun beams of moonlight.

Ninth Dream: Fire of Womb

In September Tripta woke up and sighed;
 My soul, for whom do you spin
 The long threads of attachment?
 You cannot wrap the heavens
 You cannot tie up the sun
 Nor weave the garment for the truth.
 She bowed before her womb:
 "I have discovered the secret of my dreams.
 He is not mine, nor other than mine."
 He is some timeless Yogi who came of his own will
 To warm his hands by the fire in my womb.

The Annunciation

My October is auspicious
 My being is blessed,

The fire in my womb is spinning itself into flames
My body lights up like a candle
Its wick is touched up by fire,
Send for Earth, the mid-wife,
I am having my first birth-pangs.

The Pariah Dog

Years ago
You and I went our separate ways
Without regret.
Only one thing I never quite understood...

When you and I said farewell
And our house was on sale
Our empty cooking utensils
Scattered in our courtyard
Perhaps staring at us
And others lay overturned,
Hiding their faces.

The creeper above the entrance door
Wore a withered look
Perhaps trying to say something to us
Perhaps complaining about water to the water tap
None of this or things like these
Come to my mind these days.
Only one thing keeps nagging my memory:

How a dog strayed from the road
Came into our empty room,
Sniffed around every corner
While the door closed on him.
And three days later
When the deal was closed
And we gave away the house keys.

My Friend! My Stranger!

Suddenly one day you came,
Surprised,
Time stood still in my room,
The sun about to set,
Paused.
Fated to return,
The sun forgot its fate.
The cosmic order complained.

When time looked at that moment,
Startled.
It leapt from my window.
We remember that incident
And wonder.
Perhaps time will never
Do this again.

Now the sun sets each day on time
And darkness enters my heart
Each night.
But that moment which stood still
Was the truth
Whether you and I admit it or not.
That day when time
Leapt from my window
Its knees were bruised and bled.
That blood
Still stains my window.

The Candle

I am like a candle in a Cathedral
Every day I light my feet with my heart's flame

And step out of the church.
I pass through eyes that conceal sorrow and faith
And reach the inherent beauty of words.
Yet words retain their beauty only on paper.
When that beauty escapes the printed page
And touches the flesh of earth,
It is drenched in the blood of the soil.

O Messiah of all our Todays!
When I fail to find you anywhere
My flame flickers.
All I can hear are bullets whistling
And the thunder of guns.
Then I retrieve my steps to the Cathedral
Which has yet to be built anywhere.

A Brief Encounter

After many years we chanced upon each other
Both our beings, throbbed like a poem.

A long night awaited us.
But half the poem remained in one corner,
And the other half in the other.

At daybreak like torn bits of paper we met.
I clasped his hand in mine and he held me in his arms.

And then we laughed like censors
And laying the paper on the cold table,
We crossed the whole poem.

A Meeting

Silent, alone and calm, I stood
Nearby a storm, in the sea brewed.

What betook the sea, God alone know
In a cloth bundled the storm,
Handed it to me, smiled and turned away.

Though wonder struck, I held on to the miracle
I knew it happens once in a century.

Many ideas came, sparkled in the mind
Hesitated—wondered
How I'll take it to my city

For narrow are the lanes of my city,
Low are the roofs of my city,
Gossiping, are the walls of my city.

If I could meet you, I thought
We could hold the storm between the two of us like the sea.

And we could smile like the two shores,
And we could reside in the city,
Of narrow lanes, low roofs and gossiping walls.

The whole afternoon was spent searching you
I gulped the fire that raged within me
I was a lonely crumbling shore
At sunset, the storm to the sea I returned.

Now when the night approaches, you I meet
Silent, sad and calm you stand
I silent, sad and calm too
Only in the far distant sea, the storm brews.

The Bridge

Yesterday we had burnt a bridge
And like the banks of a river
We set our destiny.

We shook our bodies and observed

On one bank lay one desolate body
And the other on the other side

And whenever spring gave us flowers
Then you plucked them from your body
And I too returned them to spring.
And like falling leaves swept in the river
We let so many years be washed away.

The years have passed but the waters still flow
Reflections were seen but never saw each other.

Before we crumble, between small distance
Let us spread our wrinkled bodies

So you can step on your own body
And I on my own, and walk to meet you halfway.

Words

There was a city of stone
The descendants of the dynasty of the sun and moon
The stones, resided in that city.

And it is said
The tyrant kings reigned
The rulers had no ear, the subject had no voice.

And when helplessly they wept
They transformed into stones,
Stone idols and stone priests
Eternal bliss was a far off thing
And the breach further widened.

In the city of stone the sun horse neighed
Stamped its feet on the stone
The cloud elephants trumpeted,
Upturning the stones with their feet

The hissing darkness of night coiled on the stones
Section 144 was imposed.

And in terror the stones shrunk in their hearts corner
And like the hidden desire deep inside
Would seek out to sprout like a blade of grass or a pale flower
Like the shiver that breaks a rishis meditation.
Life flickered on
Thats how in the city, the stone tribe increased

One a slab, the other a stone
Were destined to meet in that city
Together they ate the forbidden fruit, love

A thought comes whenever I sit
If I too were a green leaf,
A deep breath of their bodies
A tender green shoot,
Then, I would have been blessed with their embrace

The sun horse might have continued neighing then
The cloud elephants their trumpeting
The snakes of darkness, hissing out the orders of the kings
But then I would sit relaxed in the shelter of the slab and
stone.

Or be hidden in some crevice of their parental warmth

What kind of flint stones they were I didn't know.
Under a grey sky, on the dirty soil
Sleeping on a bed stones.

When the two rubbed against each other
A spark, was born
When the spark was born,
The slab shivered and the stone shook.
So they cuddled the fire in their laps
And gave it the first taste of smoke.

Laughed and laughed, the midwife wind
Wept and wept the one who gave birth

And said "The fire doesn't play in the laps of stone"
Sorrows of stones are as old as stones.

On the tongues of stones, the blisters are of stone
We belong to the earth, you to the winds".

Then all was silent not a word more was spoken.
Perhaps before, the eternal sleep, I didn't see.
The spark breaking out into a flame.

On the lips of fire the flame breathes
And in the bones nothing but smoke.

Wherever these flowing winds take me
Warm ash falls out from my body
For every new day in my life
Turned in my embrace, into ashes.

I asked

Does the fate line quiver like the spiralling smoke?
Does the pyres flame spark from the mothers womb?
I kept burning in the pyres flame.

But the darkness of sleep
Was like a blue flame of dreams
And I realised

That the funeral fire is an insult to the fire.
I am familiar with the fire of life
That burnt in the love legends of Sohni, Sassi and Heer.
And it occurred to me, that the funeral fire is an insult to the
fire

In the city of stones
It seemed that the fire lit by the poet Waris
I have inherited the same within me.

But nobody nourishes fire in the city of stones
No one burns fire in the oven of feelings.
Nobody warms hands in the furnace of thought
And the blisters of fire erupted on my tongue.

And the dwellers of the city of stone
 Said, "put out the fire, put out the fire, put out the fire
 Fill fill it in some celler
 Press press your thumb in its throat
 Go-go and throw it in some stream".
 On the bank of some stones stood a city of stones.
 And nobody shared the pain of the motherless fire.

And the same wind that nourished me in its lap
 And who gave birth to my mother's, mothers mother,
 Came running from some where
 Bringing a few words in both her hands
 And said, "Don't consider them to be mere black and small
 lines.

They are the playmates of your fire,
 They have the daring of the flames,
 They outleap even the flames,
 And saying so she moved away,
 "Let these words keep alive the fire within you."

Last Night

Last night . . .
 Walking amongst the ruins
 Of my unconscious mind,
 I observed the moments...yes moments,
 Perhaps while throbbing
 Stood frozen in the air,
 And their feet turned to stone,
 Right there.

And then their shadows grew long,
 On the backs of stones
 Like moss, clung.

On one side, a palace in ruins,

On the other
A broken wall of a hermit's cave,
Each stone my finger tips touched—
Laughed at first...then cried.

Oh God! What did happen,
What consciousness
Has just returned from the ruins.

My legs and feet feel stiff,
As if from a long journey
Of many births,
In a single breath,
So many periods, I walked.

Now I can see the moss fall
From my finger tips
That touched the stones.

The First Creation

I was...a formless I
It came from within to form into water,
It was you whose desire burst into a flame
And the fire floated over the waters that was the scene
But it was a tale of the prehistoric times.

It was the thirst of the earthly I
And I drank from the river that was you
How green was the dream of the earthly I
So I discovered the forest that was you.

It was the passion of the earthly I
And the love for the sky that was you
And the blue dream that was you
Slept on the bed of sand.
This was the mingled fragrance of our bodies,

And this was the first creation of reality,
The creation of the universe came much later.

The First Painting

I was...perhaps you too
A shadow amongst the wandering shadows
And perhaps you were like a dark shadow
Fragment of darkness within the darkness
But that is a tale of prehistoric times.

It was the darkness of nights and trees
Which was our mantle
When a sunbeam
Passing through our bodies
Was engrained on the distant stone.
It was the pin points of light
That carved the shapes of our limits
This was the first painting of the world.

The leaves rubbed off their green,
The clouds gave it a milky touch!
And the sky the greyness.
The flowers gave off their red, yellow and blues
The art of painting came much later.

The First Melody

I was...perhaps you too
An endless silence prevailed,
Like the falling dry leaves
Like the sinking sands swept by the sea
But that was a tale of prehistoric times.

On the turning point I called for you

When you answered my call
Something quivered on the lips of the wind.
And the sand rustled,
The streams hummed,
The branches of trees became alert.
Leaves fluttered,
Eyes of buds blinked,
A bird fluffed her feathers.
This was the first melody which was heard
But the seven notes came much later.

The First Book

I was...perhaps you too
At a breaths distance stood!
Sitting in the shadow of the vision!
Walking on the edge of consciousness!
But that is a tale of prehistoric times.

It was the existence of yours and mine
Which became the first language of the world
Words were coined to identify me
Words were coined to identify you
And the first book was written in that language.

It was symbiosis of you and me
We slept on the bed of stones.
And our eyes, lips and finger tips
Became the words of our body
They in turn translated the first book.
Rig Veda was compiled much later.

The First Religion

When I had cloaked myself with your being

The bodies in meditation met.
Like a creeper our limbs became entwined
And on the altar of the soul as an offering
You and I, for the sacred fire became.
When each named the other,
Those very names became the Sacred mantras,
This was the Yog of our existence
Religious rituals came much later.

The Primitive Tribe

When I opened up like spring
And the plant of flesh sprouted
The veil of wind was full of fragrance
The word "You" blossomed out
In the shadow of you and me
When 'he' unperturbed slept
It was our concern for him
That we shared the grain of wheat
He was the simple truth
The fulfilment of you and me
The tribal tales came much later.

The Primitive Law

From the reality of form
To the dignity of the being that was I.
From the beauty of the form
To love of the being that was you.

It was the realisation of the word "I"
Which made it meaningful.
It was the celebration of the word "You"
Which recognised the word "He"

Without fear was the existence of "I"
 So too the being of "You " and "He"

The code of Manu came much later.

A Letter

Dipping my pen—
 in the ink pots of Sun and Moon
 I am writing to you all.

my ruler friends!
 before you start firing—
 bullets, guns and atoms

read this letter!
 my Scientist friends!
 before making bullets, guns and atoms
 read this letter!
 words of stars and language of rays
 if you can not read
 ask some lover to read it for you,
 ask some writer to read it for you,
 or ask your beloved to read it for you.

it is every mother's mother-tongue,
 get this letter read from any mother—
 Moon and Sun are two inkpots
 lift your pen, reply to this letter,
 and write a word or two
 about the well being of this earth.

My ruler friends! my Scientist friends!

Fiction

Stench of Kerosene

OUTSIDE, a mare neighed. Guleri recognized the neighing and ran out of the room. The mare was from her parents' village. She put her head against its neck as if it were the door of her father's house.

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Guleri's parents lived in Chamba. A few miles from her husband's village which was on high ground, the road curved and descended steeply down-hill. From this point one could see Chamba lying a long way away at one's feet. Whenever Guleri was homesick she would take her husband, Manak, and go up to this point. She would see the homes of Chamba twinkling in the sunlight and would come back with her heart aglow with pride.

Once every year, after the harvest had been gathered in, Guleri was allowed to spend a few days with her parents. They sent a man to Lakarmandi to bring her back to Chamba. Two of her friends too, who were also married to boys outside Chamba, came home at the same time each year. The girls looked forward to this annual meeting, when they spent many hours every day talking about their experiences, their joys and sorrows. They went about the streets together. Then there was the harvest festival. The girls would have new dresses made for the occasion.

They would have their *dupattas* dyed, starched and sprinkled with mica. They would buy glass bangles and silver ear-rings.

Guleri always counted the days to the harvest. When autumn breezes cleared the skies of the monsoon clouds, she thought of little besides her home in Chamba. She went about her daily chores—fed the cattle, cooked food for her husband's parents and then sat back to work out how long it would be before someone would come for her from her parents' village.

And now, once again, it was time for her annual visit. She caressed the mare joyfully, greeted her father's servant, Nathu, and made ready to leave next day.

Guleri did not have to put her excitement into words; the expression on face was enough. Her husband, Manak, pulled at his hookah and closed his eyes. It seemed he could not bear to face his wife.

"You will come to the fair at Chamba, won't you? Come even if only for the day," she pleaded.

Manak put aside his *chillum* but did not reply.

"Why don't you answer me?" asked Guleri in a little temper. "Shall I tell you something?"

"I know what you are going to say: 'I only go to my parents once in the year!' Well, you have never been stopped before.

"Then why do you want to stop me this time?" she demanded.

"Just this time," pleaded Manak.

"Your mother has not said anything. Why do you stand in my way?" Guleri was childishly stubborn.

"My mother..." Manak did not finish his sentence.

On the long-awaited morning, Guleri was ready long before dawn. She had no children and therefore no problem of either having to leave them with her husband's parents or taking them with her. Nathu saddled the mare as she took leave of Manak's parents. They patted her head and blessed her.

"I will come with you for a part of the way," said Manak.

Guleri was happy as they set out. Under her *dupatta* she hid Manak's flute.

After the village of Khajiar, the road descended steeply to

Chamba. There Guleri took out the flute from beneath her *dupatta* and gave it to Manak. She took Manak's hand in hers and said, "Come now, play your flute!" But Manak, lost in his thoughts, paid no heed. "Why don't you play your flute?" asked Guleri coaxingly. Manak looked at her sadly. Then putting, the flute to his lips, he blew a strange anguished wail of sound.

"Guleri, do not go away," he begged her. "I ask you again, do not go this time." He handed her back the flute, unable to continue.

"But why?" she asked. "You come over the day of the fair and we will return together. I promise you, I will not stay behind."

Manak did not ask again.

They stopped by the roadside. Nathu took the mare a few paces ahead to leave the couple alone. It crossed Manak's mind that it was at this time of the year, seven years ago, that he and his friends had come on this very road to go to the harvest festival in Chamba. And it was at this fair that Manak had first seen Guleri and they had bartered their hearts to each other. Later, managing to meet alone, Manak remembered taking her hand and telling her, "You are like unripe corn—full of milk."

"Cattle go for unripe corn," Guleri had replied, freeing her hand with a jerk. "Human beings like it better roasted. If you want me, go and ask for my hand from my father."

Amongst Manak's kinsmen, it was customary to settle the bride-price before the wedding. Manak was nervous because he did not know the price Guleri's father would demand from him. But Guleri's father was prosperous and had lived in cities. He had sworn that he would not take money for his daughter, but would give her to a worthy young man of a good family. Manak, he decided, answered these requirements and, very soon after, Guleri and Manak were married. Deep in memories, Manak was roused by Guleri's hand on his shoulder.

"What are you dreaming of?" she teased him.

Manak did not answer. The mare neighed impatiently and Guleri, thinking of the journey ahead of her, arose to leave. "Do you know the blue-bell wood a couple of miles from here?" She

asked. "It is said that anyone who goes through it becomes deaf."

"Yes."

"It seems to me as if you had passed through the blue-bell wood; you do not hear anything that I say."

"You are right, Guleri. I cannot hear anything that you are saying to me," replied Manak, with a deep sigh.

Both of them looked at each other. Neither understood the other's thoughts.

"I will go now. You had better return home. You have come a long way," said Guleri gently

"You have walked all this distance. Better get on the mare," replied Manak.

"Here, take your flute."

"You take it with you."

"Will you come and play it on the day of the fair?" asked Guleri with a smile. The sun shone in her eyes. Manak turned his face away. Guleri, perplexed, shrugged her shoulders and took the road to Chamba. Manak returned to his home.

Entering the house, he slumped listless, on his *charpoy*.

"You have been away a long time," exclaimed his mother. "Did you go all the way to Chamba?"

"Not all the way! Only to the top of the hill." Manak's voice was heavy.

"Why do you croak like an old woman," asked his mother severely. "Be a man."

Manak wanted to retort, "You are a woman; why don't you cry like one for a change." But he remained silent.

Manak and Guleri had been married seven years, but she had never borne a child and Manak's mother had made a secret resolve: "I will not let it go beyond the eighth year."

This year, true to her decision, she had paid Rs. 500 to get him a second wife and now she had waited, as Manak knew, for the time when Guleri went to her parents to bring in the new bride.

Obedient to his mother and to custom, Manak's body responded to the new woman. But his heart was dead within him.

In the early hours of one morning, he was smoking his *chillum* when an old friend happened to pass by.

"He Bhavani, where are you going so early in the morning?"

Bhavani stopped. He had a small bundle on his shoulder. "Nowhere in particular," he replied evasively.

"You must be on your way to some place or the other," exclaimed Manak. "What about a smoke?"

Bhavani sat down on his haunches and took the *chillum* from Manak's hands. "I am going to Chamba for the fair," he replied at last.

"Bhavani's words pierced through Manak's heart like a needle.

"Is the fair today?"

"It is the same day every year," replied Bhavani drily. "Don't you remember, we were in the same party seven years ago?" Bhavani did not say any more, but Manak was conscious of the other man's rebuke and he felt uneasy. Bhavani put down the *chillum* and picked up his bundle. His flute was sticking out of the bundle. Bidding Manak farewell, he walked away. Manak's eyes remained on the flute till Bhavani disappeared from view.

Next afternoon, when Manak was in his fields, he saw Bhavani coming back, but deliberately he looked the other way. He did not want to talk to Bhavani or hear anything about the fair. But Bhavani came round the other side and sat down in front of Manak. His face was sad, lightless as a cinder.

"Guleri is dead," said Bhavani in a flat voice.

"What?"

"When she heard of your second marriage, she soaked her clothes in kerosene and set fire to them."

Manak, mute with pain, could only stare and feel his own life burning out.

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The days went by. Manak resumed his work in the fields and ate his meals when they were given to him. But he was like a

~~Manak~~ *his face quite blank, his eyes empty*

"I am not his spouse," complained his second wife. "I am just *someone he happened to marry.*"

But quite soon she was pregnant and Manak's mother was well pleased with her new daughter-in-law. She told Manak about his wife's condition, but he looked as if he did not understand, and his eyes were empty.

His mother encouraged her daughter-in-law to bear with her husband's moods for a few days. As soon as the child was born and placed in his father's lap, she said, Manak would change.

A son was born to Manak's wife; and his mother, rejoicing, bathed the boy, dressed him in fine clothes and put him in Manak's lap. Manak stared at the new-born babe in his lap. He stared a long time, uncomprehending, his face, as usual, expressionless. Then, suddenly the blank eyes filled with horror, and Manak began to scream. "Take him away!" he shrieked hysterically, "take him away. He stinks of Kerosene!"

The Weed

ANGOORI was the new bride of the old servant of my neighbour's neighbour's neighbour. Every bride is new for that matter. But she was new with a difference. She was the second wife of her twice-married husband, who could not be called new because he had already drunk at the conjugal well. As such the prerogative of being new went to Angoori only. This realization was further accentuated considering the five years that passed before they could consummate the union. Besides, she had been here for a few months only. She still carried a rustic freshness and girlish coyness about her.

About six years ago, Prabhati went home to cremate his first wife. When the cremation was over, Angoori's father approached him and took over his wet towel. He wringed it dry, making a symbolic gesture of wiping away Prabhati's tears of grief, the profusion of which had wet his towel.

There never was a man though who cried enough to wet a yard and a half of calico length. The towel became wet only when he had the after-cremation bath. The simple act of drying the so-called tear-stained towel on the part of a person with an unmarried daughter said, "I give you my daughter to take the place of the one who died. You need not cry now. I have dried even your tear-wet towel."

This was the way Angoori married Prabhati. However, their

union was postponed for over five years for two reasons, her age and her mother's paralysis. At last, when Prabhati was invited to take away the bride, it seemed she would have to stay back at the village. His employer was reluctant to add another mouth to his kitchen. But when Prabhati told him that his wife would keep her own house, he agreed.

Angoori stayed behind the veil from both men and women in the beginning. The loop of the veil soon started shrinking till it only covered her hair as was becoming of an orthodox Hindu woman. She was a dear one, a delight to the eye and the ear. There was laughter in the tinkling of her thousand ankle bells and a hundred thousand bells in her laughter.

"What are you wearing, Angoori?" I asked her one day.

"This, lovely one? Anklet, for my foot."

"That, on your finger?"

"*Bichwa* it be."

"And on the arms?"

"*Pachela*."

"Now tell me the one on your forehead. "

"They call it *Aliband*."

"Nothing on your waist today, Angoori?"

"Pretty heavy it weighs. Tomorrow, I wear. Today no necklace, see. Joints gone. Tomorrow I go to the city and get a new joint to it, also buy a nose-pin with a ring. My mother-in-law kept it."

Angoori was very proud of her silver jewellery. She was transported by the mere touch of her trinkets. Her whole being seemed to be setting them off to maximum effect.

The weather became close with the turn of the season. Angoori too must have felt it in her hut where she passed the good part of the day. She stayed out more now. There are a few giant *neems* before my house and an old well under them. The well is not in use, though occasionally the construction worker still draws water from it. The spilt water makes several puddles around the well, which keep the atmosphere cool. Angoori often relaxed by the well.

"What you be reading, *bibi*?" Angoori asked one day, finding me with a book. I had a chair placed under the *neem*.

"Want to read it?"

"I, no reading."

"Want to learn?"

"Oh, no!!"

"Why? What's wrong with that?"

"Sin for women, reading be, sec."

"What about men?"

"They, no sin."

"Who told you all this?"

"I know."

"I read. I must be sinning."

"City women, no sin. Village women, all sin."

We both laughed at that. She had not learnt to question what she was told to believe. I thought if she found her peace in her naive convictions, who was I to question them.

Her body redeemed her dark complexion. There was an intense sense of ecstasy radiating all the time from her being; a resilient sweetness in her body. It is said a woman's body is like a lump of dough. Some have the looseness of under-done dough while others have the clinging plasticity of leavened dough. Rarely has a woman a body that can be equated to rightly done dough that is a baker's pride. Angoori's body belonged to the last category. Her rippling muscles impregnated the metallic resilience of coiled springs. I felt with my eyes her face, arms, breast, legs and experienced a profound languor. I thought of Prabhati, old, short-statured, hanging jaw of a man who could be the death of Euclid. Suddenly a funny idea struck me. Angoori was the dough covered by Prabhati. He was the one protecting, not the one participating. I felt a laugh welling up inside me but I checked it lest Angoori be offended. I started talking to her about her village and kinsfolk.

I inquired the way marriages were arranged in her village.

"Girls, when five or six, adore someone's feet. He becomes her husband."

"How do they do it?"

"Her father does it for her, with money and flowers."

"That's not the same as the girl doing it."

"Oh he does it for the girl, so it be the girl."

"But the girl has not seen the man even."

"Girls no see."

"Not a single girl?"

She said "no" hesitatingly but then added, "Those in love do."

"Do the girls in your village have love affairs?"

"Some have."

"Don't they sin, those who fall in love?"

"It's a sin, great one it be."

"Are not they afraid of sinning?"

"They are. It's not them that do it. It's men make them do it!"

"How do the men make them do it?"

"With the weed, a wild one. One who eats it loves the man who gave it!"

"Does she know when eating the weed?"

"Oh, no, they do it without her knowing. Give her in sweet or betel. Once she has eaten the weed, nothing satisfies her but to be with her man."

"True!"

"I know. I have seen with my own eyes. She is my friend, older than me."

"What happened?"

"Why, she went crazy. Ran away with him to the city."

"How do you know it was the weed?"

"What else? Why should she leave her parents? He brought her many things from the city, clothes, trinkets, sweets."

"Love can also be otherwise?"

"No otherwise. When parents object, why does she like that?"

"Have you seen the weed?"

"No. It grows in a far land. My mother warned me not to accept a betel or sweets from a man lest it contain the weed."

"You were wise. How come your friend ate it?"

"She suffered," she said sadly. "No comb to her hair. Sang at night. She talked to herself."

"What did she sing?"

"Don't know. They all sing them who eat the weed. Weep also."

The talk becoming emotional, I retired.

I found her sitting under the *neem* one day in a profoundly abstract mood. Usually one could hear Angoori's arrival at the well much before she reached it. Her anklets carried the tidings. But they were dumb that day.

"What's the matter, Angoori?"

She gave me a blank look and then, recovering, said, "Teach me reading, *bibi*."

"What happened, Angoori?"

"Teach me writing my name."

"Whom will you write?"

She did not answer. Once again she was lost

"Won't you be sinning?" I said to draw her. She would not talk. I retired for the afternoon siesta.

When I came out in the evening, she was still sitting there, crooning to herself a sob of a song. Hearing my footfalls, she turned round and swallowed her song. She sat with hunched shoulders, perhaps because of the chill in the evening breeze.

"You sing well, Angoori," I watched her make a heroic effort to turn back the brimming tears and sketch a smile across her mouth.

"I know not singing."

"You do, Angoori."

"This was a..."

"Song that your friend sang," I completed her sentence.

"Heard it from her."

"Won't you sing it for me?"

"Oh, it's just about the change of seasons, four months winter, four months summer, four months rain."

"Not like that. Sing."

She did not sing though she did tell the wording. It went: Four months winter reigns, my heart shivers, my love; four months summer it be, wind shimmers in the sun; four months come

rains, clouds tremble, my love.”

“Angoori?”

She looked up as if from a trance. I felt like shaking her by the shoulders and asking if she had eaten the weed. I did put an arm around her shoulders. I asked if she had lunch. She cooked for herself since Prabhati ate at his masters.

“Did you cook today?”

“Not yet.”

“Did you have tea in the morning?”

“Tea! No milk today.”

“Why wasn’t there any milk today?”

“I not get milk. Ram Tara...”

“Fetched milk?”

She nodded.

Ram Tara was the street night-watchman. When Angoori was not there he used to get a cup of tea at our place at the end of his watch before retiring with a cot to the well. After Angoori’s arrival he prepared his tea at her hearth. He, Angoori and Prabhati all had tea together before the hearth. Three days ago, Ram Tara went home on leave.

“You did not have tea for three days.”

She shook her head.

“Haven’t eaten, too?”

She did not answer. Apparently, if she did, it was not more than a morsel.

I remembered Ram Tara, good looking, quick-limbed, full of mirth. He had a way of talking with laughter hovering at the corner of his lips.

“Angoori?”

“Yes, *Bibi*.”

“Is it the weed?”

Tears flowed down her face and gathered at the tip on either side of her mouth.

“May I be accursed,” she started in a voice atremble with the load of tears, “if I ever ate sweets from him. Not a betel even. If it be tea...?” She could not finish, choked, by her sobs.

This is My Cow, Sir!

THE colour of her skin was a rare shade of light yellowish brown. Her four sensuous teats were not usual black, sagging, wrinkled lumps of flesh. Instead of these were pink with a shade of black that made the pink in them more prominent. That is why the villagers called her a Kapila cow.

Kapila had collapsed each time she had tried to get up on her broken legs. Each time, she made a gallant effort to dig her hoofs on the ground and to stand straight, she staggered and crashed helplessly on the hard ground.

Now she had even no semblance of any movement in her body. Breathing heavily she stuck out her tongue to lick the stone. Instead, her mouth tasted the salty smell of her blood. At night she had seen the other cows. Now they were all hulks of flesh, limbs torn from their bodies.

She heard some voices from far away. A voice boomed across: "This is an atrocity committed on the holy mother cow. May the damnation of God fall on these sinners and criminals who have slaughtered innocent cows."

Another agitated voice spoke: "A country in which this sin is committed has taken leave of her senses. That country will surely sink in the course of the innocent blood of cows."

A hundred voices echoed from a vaulted sky. It was as if these voices from darkness had assaulted the rays of the rising sun.

The body of Kapila was sinking into a numbness and her hoofs were stuck in streams of warm blood that flowed on the ground.

Then she felt as if some people in uniforms were walking around her and surveying what had happened. She saw them with her stony eyes. Far away she noticed the wreckage of an aeroplane.

Then what happened? somebody asked.

A humble and abject answer came: "Sir, before taking off I performed certain vital actions and lined up the plane on runway 19. Releasing the brakes and power on 6000 RPM, I accelerated the engine to take off. When I looked outside I could not see anything on the runway except the lights."

"What happened after that?" somebody asked impatiently.

The answer: "Sir, the aeroplane kept on rolling, the speed was increasing, the middle marker indicated a speed of 135 knots I pulled the control stick and as I did so I was looking at the instrument panel. The nose wheel of the plane lifted and then I felt a number of violent shocks and jerks."

He went on: "I shut the engine immediately and applied the brakes. I felt, as if somebody was shaking the plane violently. My first reaction was that, perhaps, the tyre of the plane had burst or that it had skidded off the runway towards the trees. Or, perhaps it had even crashed into a pit. At this moment with a terrible jerk the right wheel of the plane broke away and with a sharp swerve it turned right and then skidded off the runway. There were sparks around the plane as its belly screeched against the ground."

The voice interrupted him, "Where was the Navigator at that time?"

A new voice intervened: "Sir I am the Navigator of the plane. At the time of the take off I was sitting on the crash seat. The plane came to a sudden stop and I tried to open the entry door. But the door had got jammed. Then I saw that the nose section of the plane had broken apart with a big gaping hole in it and I squeezed out of that hole."

Somebody asked the pilot: "How did you get out of plane?" An abject voice replied: "Sir, I had only one way of getting out an that was to jettison out of my seat canopy. I pressed the button, the canopy flung open and then again shut back with a bang. The aeroplane at that time was still. Therefore, there was no flow of air under it. I realised that I was imprisoned in the aeroplane. I tried to open the canopy with my hands but I could not raise it. Then I tried to raise the canopy open by pressing my head against it. I struggled and opened it with my hands. Holding it ajar, I jumped out. When I came out, I saw that the right wing of the plane had broken off. There were pools of blood round the runway and I saw many cows lying dead. ' was afraid that with this impact the plane would catch fire. That is why we raced off and stood far away."

Another voice called out: "But how the hell did these cows get into the airfield area?" Quick came an answer: "Sir, we are completely ignorant about it and it is in fact amazing."

An authoritarian voice rang: "This investigation must go on vigorously. But right now you are in a situation of danger. Both of you should not go out of your protected areas. For there is a demonstration going on in the village against us for having rammed into these cows."

Kapila felt that her life was ebbing away. Her eyes opened, blinked and then closed again. Her eyelids dropped on her eyes like heavy curtains. The light was fading into darkness. She felt as if a throng of people was gathering around her as she heard a multitude of voices. Somebody asked: "Who are the owners of these dead cows?" Kapila felt some stirring within her. But as she tried to look up, silence fell on the scene. From somewhere a voice came loud and clear: "Those of you who own the cows will give your names. You will get compensation for these dead cows."

Then a babble of voices tore the air in a burst of cries and shrieks.

"This was my cow Sir,"

"This white cow is mine and my name is Shera."

"This was my cow, Sir, and my name is Harnama."

"This cow with three teats is mine and my name is Rakha."

"This tailless cow is mine, Sir.'

This cow is mine...

This cow...

This cow...

A babble of voices and names shook the silence of this ghastly landscape of blood and hulks of flesh.

And then a voice thundered out: "So I see. You have given twenty names but there are only ten cows here. You are all a pack of liars."

Kapila tried to open her eyes and to identify the owners of the cows. Some faces were familiar; the others completely strange. No one ever knew from where they had come. Kapila recognised the face of her master, Mohna. She thought of her calf and with all the might of her fading life she tried to yell out something. But, a big lump choked her throat.

A voice boomed in the air: "You are disclosing ownership of these cows because you want to grab compensation. Eh. I see your game. But you are not owners of these dead cows. You are all fakers and deceivers."

Even before these words had died, the owners of the cows slipped. Instead, a deafening darkness fell on the landscape. Kapila did not know whether it was the darkness of the approaching night or the darkness of death that was stalking around her, ready to grab her by the throat and take her far away. A pause of silence followed as if many hundred years had passed. A voice yelled out: "Tell us, chaukidar, how did these cows ever get into the restricted areas of this airfield? We have just come to know that these cows are brought stealthily to graze here every night. The owners of these cows bribe you every month and now you are going to be hauled up for this scandal."

Kapila's life was a mere faint glow now. She tried to move her tail to flap away the flies on her body. But even her tail had become numb and motionless.

Somebody marched on the scene with his boots thumping the

ground. He shouted, "Where are all the twenty people who had come to claim these cows? Now, no one is prepared to even own these dead animals. All of them now say that these are not their cows – just because they know fully well that they have caused a damage of thirty-five lakh rupees to our plane! And now the cows will have to bear this."

Kapila longed to see the face of her master but he had fled. Her mind reeled and shuttled back and forth in a myriad images of memories.

Time it was when her master, Mohna, was unwell and all hope had been given up for him. Some saint had told him that on a Tuesday he should give a ball of kneaded flour to his cow with his own hands. And as if like a miracle Mohna had recovered.

Kapila's numbness and her lifeless limbs felt a strange sensation, a hunger of longing. A ball of kneaded flour! Memories shuttled backward and forward for Tuesday. Is it a Tuesday? Where is he? My master. Does she have a master? Who will ever own her now? A limp of lifelessness.

Kapila's stony eyes faintly saw some movement in front of her. May be, Mohna had come to put his soft hand on the lifeless skin of his dying cow.

With a great effort she tried to lift the eyelids off her misty eyes. A soft touch on her skin sent a shiver of warmth through her body. Something was touching her.... A touch of velvet.... A feeling of silk. Some-thing softer and warmer than the caressing hands of Mohna?

Through the slit of her dropping eyes she now knew who it was. Her own being. Her very life. Her own calf.

From somewhere her own calf had come. Where did he come from? A part of her being, her own calf was licking the body of his dying mother. A surge of tide hit her and she was carried on it far away.

Gulyana's Letter

THE branches were covered with a profusion of leaves but there were no signs of buds. I would scrutinise the tiny plant every day and search for the *champak* blossoms in vain. When would they bloom? I know that the *mali* had laughed when he discovered that I was coaxing a *champak* sapling to flourish in a cramped-up pot and swore that it would only spring to life once it had let its roots sink deep into the earth. Today I was humbled by his wisdom and decided to release the sapling from the earthen pot. Just when I had finished planting it in the garden, a woman suddenly appeared near the boundary wall.

"If only you could guess how far I have come in search of you," she complained, a little out of breath.

I was rather puzzled as I looked into her still, grey eyes and said at last, "But I don't even know you!"

She rested against the wall, tired, and said, "My name is Gulyana."

There was an awkward pause before she spoke again passionately.

"I have been trudging for the last two years and my feet are tired and weigh like lead but when I heard about you, I knew at once that I would have to walk on, to meet you." Her accent was heavy. Slavic, I thought. She never explained her desire to know me and I never asked her any questions.

"You have been walking for two years! You must have come from a very distant land indeed!" She looked so fragile and vulnerable. Quick to note the doubt that crept into my voice, she shook her head violently and said, "Yes, for two complete years. I came from Yugoslavia and have been in India for about a month. But so many people spoke about you that I knew at once that I could not leave your country without getting to know you. That is why I have been on my feet, looking for you since yesterday."

Again, she gave no reasons why she had searched for me and again I did not demand any explanations. I brushed the remains of the loamy earth from my hands and ushered Gulyana into the house. "Come in and have a cup of tea," I said.

As I washed my hands in the kitchen sink, I saw Gulyana aimlessly eye the living room with casual interest. I set the water to boil and she settled down near a window seat. Her hands lay listlessly in her lap as she looked out of the window and stared at the sky. I poured out the tea after arranging the cups and saucers, the sugar bowl and the milk jug on a tray as my guest sat silently and made no attempt to indulge in conversation.

I handed her a cup as a stray lock of hair fell on her brow. I impulsively pushed it back and asked her, "What do you search for, Gulyana? Even feet of lead can give in to weariness in spite of youth and beauty."

She answered by way of a heavy sigh. Then she stirred her tea and smiled at me. I could see a sudden speck of sunshine and laughter in her eyes. "I want to be a writer like you. I haven't really written anything worthwhile yet but there are so many things that I want to write about. That is why I have stepped out to see the world. I have been to Italy and France, Persia and Japan. Now I am in India and there remains so much more to see. My feet may be weary but this is no time to complain of fatigue."

A mask of determination covered her face as I said, "But surely someone must be waiting for you at home."

"My mother."

"Then she must indeed be happy receiving your letters."

"Perhaps. But she feels that each one of them may be the last that she will get. She is so afraid that no more may come."

"Why?"

"Because she is unhappy about my lust to travel. She is almost certain that somewhere on the open highroads death lurks for my arrival so that it can claim me." For a while she fell silent and concentrated on the sparrow that had flown into the room in search of crumbs. Then she spoke again, but this time to herself, "But at least she reads what I write to her." Now she turned towards me and smiled and continued, "I write her very long letters. She has lost her eyesight but she gets hold of friends to read them out to her. It is through my eyes that she really gets to see the world."

I watched Gulyana as she sipped her tea. She was such a beautiful woman and I could not comprehend her serenity because she seemed to be driven, almost, to stalk the world

"Gulyana, you have travelled much but has no city stretched its arms to stop you?" Has your heart never whispered: "Ah, this is the place. Never desert it?"

"I always wished that some place would stop me. Pin me down. Bind me to its bosom. But..." Her voice became very faint and lonely.

I prodded unrelenting, "Was there no hand, no life with that much strength to hold you down?"

"Alas, I never found it. Do I expect too much from life?" She paused at this question and her head drooped slightly. Then she suddenly swung herself towards me and exclaimed. "But I speak to you in riddles. It may be true that what I am looking for may really be an illusion and impossible to discover but I have my own reasons for the search."

I waited for her to say something again as she looked through my walls and even, perhaps, through my country.

"I walked out on life's journey when the struggle for freedom began to grip my country. It was in 1941 that we revolted for the rule of the people. I was impressionable and young and decided to become a rebel. In the following years my days were full of

struggle. There were many young people like me who believed in freedom and we spent months on end in camps in the mountains. When the enemy attacked we would seek shelter in secret caves and dense forests. I recall one fatal night when we had to walk over sixty miles."

"Sixty miles?" I said in amazement. "Your delicate frame has a lot of strength."

"That was merely one night out of the many that we had to walk. But then we were all together. Three hundred fellow travellers. It takes much more courage and strength to walk it alone." She turned away with an abrupt shake of her head. "Let us talk of pleasant things. Sing me a song of your country." At that moment I could not think of any songs to sing. I wanted only to understand, to comprehend.

"I have no songs for you, Gulyana. But why do you ask me to sing? Do you compose songs?"

"I tried for some time. Then quite suddenly all the songs remained withered within me. Perhaps they may bloom once more. Who can tell." She looked so utterly sad.

"What kind of songs did you write? Love songs?"

She shook her head this time with impatience. "No, no. But if I ever sing again, it will only be about flowers that spring from the earth absolutely free. Love cannot blossom within the narrow confines of a garden pot."

I remembered my *champak* sapling and stared in wonder at her. Could it be true that Gulyana would also find her fulfilment from the entire earth? Would the earth repay her for what it had withdrawn? In silence I wondered.

"But to expect so much is more than one's needs," she said as she looked at me with eyes that were bleak.

"No, no," I protested, "the need becomes more than enough if it equals the heart's desires. There can never be too much, Gulyana."

She gave me a sad smile, "The desire of the heart has no equal."

She tilted her head on one side and sat silently. After a while

she spoke with great effort. "We have a folk song which says: Your bridal chair is carried by page boys. But who, alas, will carry your coffin?" Her grey eyes seemed to drill me as she asked, "Who, indeed, will carry my coffin?"

I let my gaze linger on the sombre expression that spread over her face and questioned, "Have you never loved anybody, Gulyana?"

"There was a vague stirring but now I know that it could not have been love. Love would have endured beyond life. I would have been desired by my man just as intensely as I longed for him. I married because I believed in love. But marriage only trapped me. My heart ceased to blossom in a cloistered garden pot. I needed the length and breadth of the entire earth to sustain me."

"But this earth..." My words were silenced before the contempt that welled in her eyes.

"Are you frightened of this earth?"

I smiled. "No, Gulyana, I am not afraid of this earth. The earth is warm and fertile but..."

"I know what frightens you." Gulyana's voice cracked harshly over mine. "I was also mortally scared throughout my journey. But I refuse to let fear stop me from blooming on this earth." She dug her nails into her fists. "I challenge everyone who will deny me a place in the sun. Woman was put on the earth to fulfil herself." Her voice broke under the weight of a sob. "Why should women always endure the bestiality of man?"

I recognise her pain because I had suffered also. "Have you found it like this in all the places that you have visited?"

"It was terrible in Persia. I wanted so much to go out and explore but I was warned by my hotel people not to venture out alone even during day."

"Then what did you do?"

"I came into a bit of luck. A gentleman staying at my hotel loaned me his car and his chauffeur. But he never came with me." The thought made her silent. "Yes, one comes across good people but not often enough. I had to take someone's kindness.

But why should I have to do that? It's all wrong!"

She stood up and stretched herself. She drifted about the room looking at odd bits of decor and then began speaking again. "I felt very free in Japan. A drunkard knocked on my door one night. When I complained about it to the receptionist over the intercom, he was promptly removed. But that was a different thing, the man was drunk."

She seemed as if she was not talking to me any longer. I sank into the cushions on the couch as Gulyana's voice flowed all around me. "The rains prevented a critical embarrassment in France. I had taken a walk into the country and decided to rest in the garden of a tiny inn. Two men had been following me. A little away from the inn the road curled about a hill and even though I wanted to walk up that stretch, the two men loitered on the road and seemed like obstructions on my path. In the beginning I was terrified and then I felt a surge of anger burst in my heart. Why should scoundrels stop me from getting what I desired? I left for the hill. I had hardly walked a few yards when the clouds parted and a torrent of rain came pouring down. I hurried back to the inn. The men had disappeared but a strange fear gripped my heart. Men pretend to be civilised when, in fact, a bestiality lurks behind the facade."

Tears brimmed her eyes as she sat next to me on the divan clenching her fists and kneading the cushion that she clutched. I wanted to ask her a question but poured her a cup of tea instead and waited for a while as she sipped the hot beverage. At last she shrugged a little and a smile crept about her lips.

"Tell me, Gulyana, how do you manage to survive? Do you work?"

"Yes, I write short travel stories for a magazine back home. They pay me a regular fee. I have a good command over French and also do translation work. Once I get back to my country I will write a travel memoir. Who can tell, I may even write songs once more!" She smiled a secret smile on her last remark. Her voice dropped to a whisper as she leaned towards me, "When I sleep a song slips into my heart but there is no trace of it when I

wake up.”

“Tell me quickly about that song, Gulyana,” I said. “Everything else has no importance.” I pressed her arm urgently.

“Not even the song. Only its purpose,” Gulyana replied.

“Yes, yes,” I nodded. “The purpose. That is all that I am interested in. It is for a purpose that a song is born. Without a purpose you can only make verses rhyme. That is all. You cannot make a song can you?”

Gulyana smiled wistfully and then recited, “Who rent the sky today, who brought down a bouquet of stars and tied it around my waist like a familiar bunch of keys?” She clasped her hand to her waist. “Sometimes I am certain that those stars are here,” she whispered.

I was moved by that gesture. She had refused the common bondage of silver key rings. The petty rules of mundane keys. But when would a house be built that needed a chatelaine of stars? She gave me a quizzical look.

“You are so quiet. What are you thinking about?”

“Do the women folk in your country carry keys perched on their waists?”

“Yes. Keys always remind one of home. The eternal dream of every woman.” She mused for a moment and then walked up to the window and looked out into the garden that seemed to droop under the blaze of the sun. “Look, how far I have walked in search of that dream’s reality.” She turned towards me and extended her arms. “I shall now abandon those dreams as a security for my songs.” Listlessly her hands fell on her sides.

“So you want the earth to be indebted to you?”

At the mention of debt Gulyana laughed bitterly. The laughter of a creditor who knows that the debt can never be paid. In silence she leaned against the window pane. As I watched her I thought how she could be best described.

Name: Gulyana Saynovia

Father’s name: Nikolipan Saynovia

Birth place: Macedonia

Height: Five feet three inches

Hair: Brown

Eyes: Grey

Identification marks: A spot on the nether lip, a small scar near the left eyebrow.

But what did this cold description really tell? Nothing of the truth. A true description would read like this:

Name: The fragrance of flowers

Father's name: A dream man

Birth place: The fertile earth

Height: A bunch of stars around her waist

Hair: The colour of the earth

Eyes: Like the skies of summer

Identification marks: Thirst for life and flowers of dreams.

It was really strange that life had created this hauntingly beautiful woman but having moulded her, had forgotten to inquire after her. But, after all, was this really strange? To forget is life's old habit. I remembered something suddenly and spoke to Gulyana with a laugh.

"In India we have a herb called the *Brahmi* and our ancient books tell us that whosoever would grind the *Brahmi* and eat it would have the gift of eternal memory. I think life should grind this herb and eat it."

Gulyana smiled. "Whenever something beautiful gets created, the maker of that moment consumes the herb you talk about. Someday, perhaps, even life will partake of the *Brahmi* and be cured of its forgetfulness." Her voice was tender as she spoke to me. Infinitely tender.

Gulyana left after a little while. She did not tell me where she was going when she said farewell. But in the months that followed I have very often recalled her courage and her joy that had come mingled with a strange sadness. Every time I gaze upon a beautiful painting or read a poem or sing a song I recall her words about how the maker of beautiful moments consumes the

Brahmi herb. It is because of this that I become aware of the fact that it is almost five months since she came. She has never written to me and now I am sure that she never will.

The item in the morning newspaper is cold in its brevity. A foreign tourist had been attacked by a bunch of hooligans up in the mountains. When she was discovered, she was in a critical state and she had died before even reaching the hospital. There were only charred remains of her documents. Her height was five feet three inches. Her hair was brown and her eyes were grey. There was a spot on her nether lip and a scar on her left eyebrow. Could any one identify her?

I read the paper sadly. I shall not disclose her identity to the authorities because this was Gulyana's letter to me—and to life that let her pass by unguarded. A letter laden with questions that even life cannot answer.

Why must a woman bloom only in the rigid pots of domesticity? Why can she not be like the *champak* creeper, sending deep and strong roots into the wide earth and lifting its head to the sky? If only this was possible she need never fear the outstretched arms of men. If a house had doors that could be opened only by the stars that rested on her waist like a bunch of keys—aye, what then? Who will reply to Gulyana's letter?

Perhaps she knows the answers at long last now. I wonder bitterly as I chuck the newspaper into the roaring winter fire.

A Watch on the Orchard

ASLEEP, Gangu?"

"No, Uncle!"

"Then why are you grilling yourself in the sun? Why don't you pull your cot under the shade?"

"Yes, Uncle." Gangu got up yawning. He pulled his cot under the shade of the *jamun*. The mark of the bedpost on his bare back was vivid. He soothed his back with his hand. He then lay back on the cot, looking fagged out. "Come and sit here, Uncle," he said.

The old man raised his head to have a look at the *jamun*. The blue clusters toned his browned skin. In a state of daze, he sat on the cot.

"Not at the foot of the bed!" Gangu insisted. "Come over to this side."

"It doesn't hurt at all, Gangu!" the old man said. "This time the fruit is so plentiful that merely watching it softens anything hard. I tell you, the fruit is so luscious this time that you just don't feel the stone at all...."

"Yes, Uncle."

"I am seeing *jamun* like this after years...after years, I tell you. After ten whole years, I think..."

"I thought so too, Uncle."

"You must have been fourteen then, or maybe fifteen.... The trees were laden so heavily then...so very heavily.... Your father was living then, I remember...."

*The king of fruits is there!
I've brought with me the king,
A pice for a measure
The king and the treasure....*

Gangu recalled his father's lilting call in the *jamun* season. Gangu recalled something else, too. He recalled slim, long fingers. They ruffled his hair as if trying to wake him up.

Gangu was startled out of his half-sleep. He turned round to see if there was anyone. No one. It was an illusion.

Gangu shut his eyes once more. It was not a girl, he thought. Tapi was not a girl. Tapi was a witch. *If Tapi were not a witch, she wouldn't still be holding me in her tight embrace of memories.... Every year, when the jamun is ripe, her memory turns fresh and it hurts....*

Tapi was twelve, then. She was a small girl with a chain round her neck, of red *rattis* strung together. She used to ruffle his hair, at times giving it a tug that hurt, and wake him up. He would then climb up the *jamun*. She would pick out the juiciest of the black fruit. Tapi would then hold Gangu in a tight embrace. Gangu used to wish those days that the embrace would be so tight that it would break at least one little bone of his body, at least one rib, so that he could lie in bed and the little girl turn into a nurse.

Gangu got frightened of his thoughts. He sat up in fear.

"What's the matter?" the old man asked.

"Bugs." Gangu was irritated. He pretended to look for them in the bedposts.

"Bugs? These days?" the old man was incredulous. "With all that *loo* blowing? Don't be silly!"

"God knows what it was." Gangu diverted his own attention mainly. He then sat on the wooden post of the bed.

"I'd better be getting along.... The boys might doze off and the birds create havoc." The old man got up. "You know, Gangu, we have put in four thousand this time, but you know, they mean sackfuls of money...sackfuls, I tell you...."

"Sacks?" Gangu laughed. "What do you means, sacks, Uncle? A small purse should be enough...."

"Come on, child! Understand, now.... If, instead of these silly paper notes, one had silver coins, the money would have filled sacks...."

"Even then one sack would have been enough...."

"For us even one sack would be just enough...."

"Yes, but then we are ten partners...that means each one of us has put in only four hundred, doesn't it? Not much...."

"All right! All right! Did I say that the contract was dear? Did I ever say that?"

"There are a hundred trees...."

"Tell me, will we have at least twice as much as we put in, or no?"

"Why not, Uncle? They sell at a rupee a seer, now. At times even more."

Gangu's agreement was enthusiastic. When the money doubled itself no one could say, but the old man's heart expanded manyfolds. The old man walked briskly towards his trees, almost losing some of the stoop old age had accompanied.

Gangu sighed. He sounded as if he had acquired a stoop in his youth itself. He lay back on the cot once more.

Tapi's memories swooped on him. They held him in a tight embrace. Gangu wished he could break just one bone, just a rib....

Tapi would unwind the string at the foot of the bed.

"Gangu! Sling it so that I can swing, please!"

"You silly girl! Does one ever use the *jamun* for a swing?"

"You do it! Why don't you do it and see?"

"Why should I do it? The *jamun* branches are not strong enough...."

"Why should that bother you? It will be *my* arm or leg that will break, won't it?"

"Who's bothered about your arms and legs? Think of the harm to the fruit when you swing like that...."

Tapi used to sulk at that. Gangu used to catch hold of her in his arms and whirl at a crazy speed with her. Tapi used to scream, quite giddy. Gangu would stop on one condition only. Tapi was to sing that song about the peaches.

"I'll sing! I'll sing!" Tapi used to pant out in a daze.

Peach tree, oh peach tree!

We reared you with love.

Peach tree, oh peach tree!

The fruit it was they took away

The stone it was they left us....

Tapi would stop singing right in the middle. "Look! All your *jamun* is being eaten up by the parrots!" When Gangu ran towards his trees, Tapi clapped her hands and sang:

Made a fool of one boy

Fooled him of his camel

Fooled him of his horse....

These memories, ten years old...weren't they? They overpowered still.

Some nerve snapped and Gangu's eyes filled with tears. *You didn't fool me, Tapi....Not at all. The parrots have destroyed my jamun and the peach has been robbed of its fruit.*

Then something bitter filled Gangu's mind, something bitter like the stone of the *jamun*.

Tapi's father had promised her to Gangu. But then, Gangu's father fell ill. The money collected for the contract of the *jamun* was spent on the old man's treatment. That year Gangu could take no contract for the *jamun*. Tapi's father got her married off elsewhere.

Gangu recalled all this with bitterness, the bitterness of the *jamun* stones bitten into by mistake....

The old man was back again to interrupt.

What is the matter with the old man? Why is he keeping watch on this cot instead of on his trees?

"I have to tell you something, Gangu...."

"Yes, Uncle...."

"You are the chief, you see, I just can't say yes or no without consulting you...."

"Come on, now, Uncle.... What is it?"

"I don't even know if you remember, youngman, but your

father had a friend.... He died about three years ago. He had a daughter, a girl called Tapi....”

Gangu sat up in his cot, as if not two but twenty bugs had bitten him.

“Going somewhere?” The old man asked, puzzled.

“Me? Oh, no. I’m not going anywhere....” Gangu was nervous.

“Now, that youngman the girl was married to...he has nothing to do. He was come from very far away, just for this *jamun* season. He has no money at all, but wants some help so that he can take the contract for the fruit, too....”

Gangu stared at the old man without uttering a word.

“We won’t have him if you don’t wish it.... I just felt sorry for the youngman, that’s all. Not for the youngman so much as for the girl.... Tapi pleaded by the hour...?” Gangu’s heart pounded. He caught hold of the trunk of the tree under which he lay. He felt the earth under him give way.

“I told the youngman quite plainly that you were our chief, and nothing could be done without your consent.”

“What do you mean ‘Chief’, Uncle....” Gangu said without interest.

“I have to tell the truth, haven’t I? Of course all the ten of us have a share in the contract, but it was not because of you.... We all know that, don’t we?”

“Don’t talk like that, Uncle. You are very much older than I, after all....” Gangu managed to bring out.

“So I should say yes?” The old man asked quickly. “The two have been standing by my cot for sometime now....”

“Have I ever said no to you?” Gangu still sounded dejected.

“So Tapi was right....” The old man cheered up.

“What did Tapi say?” Gangu asked quickly trembling all over.

“She said if Gangu is the chief then he can’t say no,” the old man made bold enough to say.

“Really?”

“I think she’s coming to you.... Look! Isn’t that Tapi?”

The old man looked into the distance screwing his eyes.

Tapi was close by, now. The old man beckoned her to come

forward. "I told you, didn't I, that Gangu is reasonable?"

"Did he remember me?" Tapi asked the old man looking at Gangu.

"What a silly thing to say!" the old man chided. "You two have grown up together, you have played together, you ate out of the same plate...and Gangu was completely under your power...."

"Really?" Tapi sat down, her head reaching upto the old man's knees.

"Don't sit on the ground, child!" The old man scolded. "Sit on the cot, come!"

"The string might hurt...." God knows why the words escaped Gangu.

Tapi's whole being lit up. She looked once more at Gangu. "You know, Uncle, when I was young, Gangu used to tease me a lot. He used to force me to make all kinds of promises...."

"What promises?" The old man was affectionate.

"The promises were many...." Tapi was lost in thought.

"He used to whirl me round and round. He never let go till I promised to sing...."

"And what did you sing?" The old man ruffled Tapi's hair.

"What could I sing, Uncle? I knew only one song. And he made me sing it over and over again....It was a silly little song...a song about peaches."

For some strange reason Tapi's eyes filled. She looked at Gangu and then looked away. Maybe she was feeling sorry for the watchman who kept watch on the laden trees and never tasted the fruit.

Gangu stood as if nailed on the spot.

Tapi looked up suddenly. Parrots. They were busy pecking at the *jamun*. Tapi got up quickly and started shooing the birds away.

Gangu's children, sleeping till now, on a cot a little further away, got up. They jumped off the bed and ran over to Gangu, reaching barely upto his knees. They held his legs in a tight embrace.

"Let the parrots be, Tapi." Gangu sounded heavy of heart.

"Let them be. The fruit is destroyed anyway...."

Karma Wali

THE oven-baked chapati, crisp and hot, was most inviting. I dipped it in the vegetable curry and bit off a morsel.

“There are too many chillies in the curry!” my children and I cried. The curry had set our mouths aflame.

“Mostly *jats* frequent my hotel”, the hotel-keeper said. “And there is only one liquor shop for miles around. When the *jats* are drunk they like to have something spicy.”

“The *jats*....”

“Yes, my child. All *jats* relish a drop of liquor. And when they commit a murder they like to get boozed, fine and proper.”

“How terrible!”

“Only the other day, a couple of them barged into the hotel, dead drunk. They had killed a man and were very rowdy. Do you see those broken chairs? It’s their doing. Bless the police that they arrived in time, otherwise my hotel would have been in a shambles. Well, anyway, I can’t complain. They are my main source of income.”

My eagerness to see the Karohaliya river had once again led me from Chandigarh to this village. Our talk had started with chillies. But from chillies it ran to liquor and then to the horrors of bloodshed—it was, indeed, a tall order. I became anxious to get away from the place with the two children.

The way-side eating place, its floor plastered with mud paste,

was clean and airy. A part of it had been portioned off by a curtain made of hessian bags through whose lower end one could glimpse the legs of three standing cots. I felt reassured. A place where a family lived could not be so risky, after all.

I was not wrong in my conjecture. Just then a woman peeped from behind the curtain. She came out, and stood before me.

"Don't you recognise me?" She said.

She was a young woman, plainly dressed. I stared at her face. Nothing moved in my mind. I was unable to place her.

"I recognised you the moment I saw you," she went on. "You came here last year- no, it was year before", she corrected herself.

"Yes, I came here year before last."

"At that time a marriage party had stopped on the *maidan*."

"A marriage party? Yes, I remember it."

"I was in a palanquin—the bride. You had given me a rupee."

Then the whole thing came vividly to my mind. About two years ago the Delhi Radio Station had asked me to recite a poem of mine at the inauguration of the Chandigarh Radio Station. The programme over, I, with some of my friends, decided to make a trip to the nearby Kaushaliya river. The way ran through this village which sloped towards the river a mile-and-a-half away. The uphill climb, on the way back, had tired us and we felt like having a hot cup of tea. This way-side eating place appeared to be the most spacious and cleanest of all, and we decided upon it. That day, besides oven-baked chapatis and cooked meat, which was the usual fare offered by the shop, we were also filled with plateful of sweets.

"To-day, my niece's bridal party will pass through the village", the owner of the eating place had said. "I owe it to my niece to entertain the party. I must do them the honour."

We were still in the shop when the party arrived. At the request of the bride's uncle it had stopped in the *maidan* on route to the next village.

"Marriage is a fascinating thing", one of us had said. "When one enters wedlock 't's all smiles and gaiety and when one...." With each sip of tea the discussion had become more and more

animated.

"If you wait for me, I'll go and look at the bride", I said. "I would like to see the expression on her face."

As I approached the palanquin my lips were set in a faint smile. There was an opening at one end of the curtain. "May I look at the bride?" I asked the barber woman who was chaperoning the bride to her new home.

"You are welcome, *bibiji*", the woman had said effusively. "Our bride has flawless beauty."

Yes, the bride was as beautiful as the sparkling pearl in her *Shringarpuri* nose-ring. I put a one-rupee note in her hand and came away.

"If the bride knew you were a celebrated poetess she would have asked you to autograph the note", one of my companions said, joking.

Though this had happened two years ago, I was able to recall every detail.

"Are you the same girl—the bride, whom I saw in the palanquin?"

"Yes."

In a matter of two years she had changed from a lovely girl into a careworn woman. I could see life had not dealt with her kindly.

I did not know how to draw her out.

"I've seen your photograph in the newspaper," she said. "Not once, but twice. You know, sometimes the customers forget their newspapers here. I came upon your photographs in one of them."

"How interesting? And you recognised me?"

"Yes, at once. But why do they put your photographs in the papers?"

No one had ever asked me such a question. I did not know how to answer her. "It's because I write poems and stories," I said, feeling embarrassed.

"Stories? Do you write stories—true stories?"

"Yes, the stories are true; but the names are false—so that nobody should know whom they are about."

"Will you write my story?"

"Of course I will, if you want me to."

"My name is Karmanwali (the fortunate one). There's no need to conceal my name. You can put it in, as it is. I'm not afraid of speaking the truth. But no one listens to me, no one cares."

She held my hand and led me to the cot behind the curtain.

"Before my marriage took place two women from my father-in-laws' house came to take my measurements. One of them was, in fact, a grown girl. Just my age. She was a distant cousin of my husband."

" 'We are the same size,' she said, after measuring my *salwar* and *kamiz*, 'The clothes that I'll make for you will fit you perfectly.' "

"What she said was true. The bridal clothes that were sent to me as a part of my preparations were exactly to my measurements. The girl lived with me for many months and made all my clothes. She was very fond of me. When she left our house she asked me not to have my clothes made by any one else even if she was away for a few months; she would like to stitch them herself when she returned."

"I liked the girl as much as she liked me. There was only one thing about her which annoyed me: she had made it a point to try all my clothes on herself before passing them on to me. 'Our measurements are the same', she would say. 'See how well your clothes fit me?' "

"In spite of the newness of the clothes I could not get rid of the feeling that they had been worn by someone else."

The woman was uncouth and unlettered, sitting on a loosely strung cot, on which was spread a rumpled, thread-bare sheet. But I was startled by the delicacy of her thought.

"I didn't tell the girl what was in my mind," the woman continued. "It might have hurt her feelings."

"Well?"

"Well, I came to know about it after a year had passed. My husband and the girl were having an affair. She was my husband's distant cousin, twice or thrice removed. Her brother was

terribly upset at these goings-on between them; and even threatened to cut off his sister's head! Some one told me that at the time of my marriage, that when the girl was holding the reins of the mare on which my husband rode to the ceremony she became hysterical and had a fainting spell."

I saw there were tears in the woman's eyes. Impulsively, she groped for my hand and held it in her trembling hand. "Please understand me clearly," she said. "I hate to put on discarded clothes. My goldlaced *salwars*, my star-studded *chunries*, my brocade *kamiz*—they were her cast-offs, in a way. And like the clothes, my husband was also—you know what I mean."

Could one clothe such feeling in words? I felt unequal to the task.

"I have left those clothes behind", the woman continued. "And my husband too. Now I live with my maternal uncle. I sweep the floor and swab the tables, I have also bought a sewing machine and take in work. I wear homespun. I am content with them. I prefer them to discarded clothes, even if they are made of the finest silk."

"My uncle is anxious to patch up our quarrel. He won't understand me. I'm happy as I am. I want nothing more. That, in short, is the story of my life. Please write it down for me. I want people to know how I feel about it."

The Fortunate One! The woman with a strong body and a strong heart—who had undergone much suffering; I pulled her to myself and embraced her.

Outside, cars sped past the small hotel, on their way down from Simla. Now and then a car briefly stopped before the hotel, and their occupants, in silks, came out for a cup of tea, or to buy cigarettes, or oven-baked chapatis. The Fortunate One, who had discarded silks and was now in a homespun *kamiz*, would silently attend to them.

"I've preserved the note that you gave me," she said.

"Really! I gave it to you a long time ago."

"Yes, I had handed it over to the barber woman for safe keeping. When I saw your photographs I took it back from her."

She pulled out a tin trunk from underneath the cot and produced a folded one-rupee note from a wooden casket.

"Please write your name on it for me," she said.

"*Karmanwali*, I gladly write my name on this note," I said. "But now I would rather that you wrote your name on mine. The story-writer is not great, but the one who lives the story. It's suffering that makes one great."

I took out a rupee note and the pen from my purse.

"I'm no good at writing," she said shyly. "But still, I'll try."

Fortunate One, today I have sat down to write your story. Your name like the sacred mark on the forehead of a devotee is the title.

I know the story will not do you any good. But those persons who spill other's blood which resembles the colour of saffron on your forehead will honour you, and those who wear the "discards" of others will hang their heads in shame

Chhamak Chhallo

“Sit a little closer, Chhallo’s mother and have a good look.” Chhallo’s old father stretched out his leg and examined it carefully. “The swelling seems to have increased,” he said. His leg throbbed with pain. He winced and drew it back.

Old Hukamchand’s first wife, Chhallo’s mother, had died many years back. After her death, Hukamchand had married a young girl, Kartaro, on the strength of his wealth and just two days after his marriage had started addressing her as Chhallo’s mother. Kartaro resented being thus addressed. “Call me by my real name—plain Kartaro,” she said peeved. “I don’t like being called Chhallo’s mother.”

“Lucky one, since I am Chhallo’s father you automatically become Chhallo’s mother. It’s as simple as that,” old Hukamchand said. “There’s nothing wrong in calling you by that name.”

At her insistence, Hukamchand had at last started calling her Kartaro though sometimes absent-mindedly he made the old mistake.

Chhallo was very dear to Hukamchand. Her real name was Kaushalya but out of affection, he had abbreviated it to Chhallo. Kartaro, however, did not like the name and made no bones about it. Hukamchand would laugh. “Bear me a son,” he would say, “and then I will stop addressing you as Chhallo’s mother. What name would you give the boy? Call him Chanan. Then I’ll

call you Chanan's mother." At this Kartaro's expression would soften and a faint smile would ripple across her face.

Many years passed but Hukamchand's hope of calling Kartaro Chanan's mother remained unrealised. No Chanan was born to her. Hukamchand kept calling her plain Kartaro and sometimes absent-mindedly, Chhallo's mother.

Then the country was partitioned. Hukamchand, who belonged to West Punjab, migrated to Karnal in East Punjab. The spell of Hukamchand's wealth by which he had kept Kartaro's youth in bondage, broke. But the fragile thread of husband-wife relationship, though many knots had now been tied in it, still kept from snapping. The staff of wealth, his only support in old age had fallen, leaving him shaken.

"Chhallo's mother!" This time Hukamchand raised his voice a little.

"Death will not come to relieve Chhallo's mother and her misery will never end," Kartaro came grumbling out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her dupatta, "yes, what is it now?"

"Don't utter such ominous words, Chhallo's real mother is dead and why are you bent upon killing the other one too?"

"As if I had killed her. I wish she had not died. Then I would have been spared the misfortune of stepping into her place. Now she sleeps in peace while I live to gather the thorns."

"Good womar, you must save yourself the trouble of gathering thorns. It's a tough job and you aren't up to it. You just carry on with your good work—keep sticking those thorns in my flesh."

"So I keep needling you, eh? And your dear daughter too? Why do you forget that it's I who bring the *thali* heaped with food for you while you sit ensconced in your cot like a lord. I cook for your dear daughter as well. Is this what you call sticking thorns in your and your daughter's flesh?"

"Kartaro, why do you put yourself to all this trouble? I've told you so many times to let the girl do the cooking. Baking a few *chappatis* is no trouble for her."

"As if she cares! Her mind is not in cooking. Once she goes out to sell baskets she is gone the whole day."

"I've told you so many times not to send her out to sell baskets. There are all sorts of people, good and bad, coming from all directions. They can be upto any mischief."

"Chhallo's father, how many more times have I to tell you not to inflict your advice on me till you are in a position to earn a few coins and place them on my palm? All you do is laze in this cot and indulge in idle talk." Kartaro started sobbing.

Hukamchand was touched. "You're right," he said. "It does not behove me to trot out words of advice. My wealth has deserted me and my health has betrayed me. You may have a bitter tongue but you're the only one who stands by me. At least you feed me on time."

Hukamchand was feeling despondent. "Heat up some oil for me and add some garlic to it. I'll rub the oil on my knee joints. And for God's sake don't cook that *urad dal* for me. It plays havoc with my body."

"No *urad dal* but meat. Today I'll cook meat for you."

"God bless you. Do you really mean it? I've been longing to taste meat. It's almost one year since I've gone without meat. It's the same burnt *dal* day after day. Even the *vaid* had said, Hukamchand, if you want to get well take mutton soup every day. Yes, you must cook meat today. A lot of it." Hukamchand looked at his swollen joints and felt as if it was his knee-joint and not his tongue that was savouring the meat.

"Yes, yes, it will be meat soup to be sure," Kartaro said. "I'll chop off my head and boil it for you."

"Oh, you're uttering evil words all the time. Who knows, with luck today she may be able to sell twenty baskets instead of four. Oh, Chhallo, my dear one, my darling girl, don't let me down today. My honour is at stake. It must be twenty baskets and not one less. And while returning home buy half a seer of meat from the meat shop. Go child, it's time for the buses to arrive. And look, don't forget to by some garlic, onions, green ginger and green chillies. Otherwise your mother will just boil the meat and dump it before me."

Hukamchand thought that Chhallo would laugh at his outland-

ish remarks but she just kept looking listlessly at her baskets.

"Even if one is inclined to buy a basket her looks put him off," Kartaro said. "Her face looks like a mailed fist." Instead of going after Hukamchand, she was now taking it out on Chhallo.

"Kartaro, I don't see anything wrong with the girl's face," Hukamchand said. "You're wantonly trying to find fault with her." Hukamchand wanted to draw Kartaro's wrath on himself.

But Kartaro was not one to relent so easily. She looked hard at Chhallo. "If only she greeted a customer with a smile he would buy two if he had a mind to buy only one. So many cars pass through this place every day packed with passengers and loaded on top with luggage. Can't those people afford to buy even two small baskets? A basket has hardly any weight. And see how colourful they are. But this girl stands mum before a customer. If only she threw some sweet words at those people when they were having a quick cup of tea at the tea-stall they wouldn't be able to resist the temptation of buying a basket...."

Chhallo heard her with a deadpan expression as if she had plugged her ears with cloth. She had so many times said to her mother, "Ma, nobody cares for these baskets. The bus and truckwallas may buy them but not those who travel in cars. They don't even glance at my baskets. If I go near their cars they snarl at me: 'stay away from the car,' they warn me. 'You may spoil the glass windows with your dirty hands.'"

But Kartaro was not convinced. Instead of fulminating at the *carwallas* she directed her anger at the girl. "You just don't know how to sell the baskets," she would fume at her. "You must greet those people with a smile as you approach them. But all you do is to stand before them expressionless, as if your face is a brass *lota*. Who will care to buy your baskets?"

Chhallo did her best not to make her face look like a *lota*. But it only made matters worse. "Why are you baring your teeth?" a man in a car once remarked as she approached him with a smile. "Go away. Only yokels buy such worthless stuff!"

One day Kartaro went full tilt at Chhallo. "That rogue! What's his name?" she said. "I mean the fellow who sells newspapers at

the bus stand? Ratna yes, that's the name. This girl's lips fall open of their own accord as soon as she sets eyes on him. Laughter comes so easily to her then as if she had learnt it without any effort."

"Kartaro, stop raking up dirt like a hen!"

Hukamchand admonished her in a sharp voice.

"Have I said anything wrong?" Kartaro retorted. "This princess of yours has developed a taste for falling in love. But she must first learn to size up her lover and know something about him. You know this fellow hawks cheap newspapers at the bus stand. How is he going to maintain her?"

Without giving Kartaro a chance to finish, Chhallo covered her head with a *chunni* and placing the load of baskets on her head she proceeded towards the bus stand.

The words "he only hawks cheap newspapers" kept ringing in her ears and hurt her like an abscess. But as she reached the bus stand, instead of taking notice of the in-coming and out-going buses her eyes searched for the newspaper seller.

"Chhallo, you are late today." Suddenly coming from behind, Ratna planted himself before Chhallo.

"I..." She trailed into silence and then gazed at Ratna's face. She knew her own face no longer resembled a *lota*. "I was finishing a basket," she said. "Beautiful, isn't it? I've woven green flowers into it."

"You make beautiful baskets," Ratna said. "But I don't like your running after everybody."

"But you also show your newspapers to everybody, don't you?" Chhallo laughed.

"My case is different. I'm a man. Nobody stares at my face."

"Who would care to stare at me? My face resembles a *lota*." Chhallo started laughing.

"Now look, don't laugh like this before a stranger. In place of baskets he may..."

"Hisht!" Chhallo's laughing face suddenly turned grave. "In front of strangers my face becomes expressionless as if I'm carrying a *lota* on my shoulders instead of a head. And mother is

all the time urging me to smile while selling to customers.”

Ratna snatched away the baskets from Chhallo’s hands. “I’ll not allow you to sell baskets,” he said. “Go and sit somewhere.” He pointed towards a closed shop. “I must go and sell these papers. I’ll try to sell off the whole lot.”

“And then you’ll buy my baskets with that money. Ratna, how long can we continue in this manner? And what use will those baskets be to you? Are you going to pickle them?”

“Yes, that’s what I’ll do—pickle them. And if you are not careful, one day your mother is also going to pickle you. I see a bus coming. You wait here. I’ll be back soon.”

Handing back the baskets to Chhallo, Ratna dashed off in the direction of the approaching bus. Chhallo thought of following Ratna to the bus and trying to sell some of her baskets. But she could not defy Ratna’s command and sat down resignedly on the plinth of the shop, resting the baskets by her side.

“A man named Tarachand has slashed his wife’s nose with a knife! A beautiful woman. Just twenty years old! It’s in today’s paper.” Ratna’s voice, hawking his papers, drifted back to Chhallo. She saw the people flocking around him and eagerly buying the papers from him. She laughed.

Ratna was always doing it. He knew the trick of arousing people’s interest in the day’s news....Hot news of a scientific invention! New Russian rockets! More about the Dalai Lama!

The driver of the bus blew his horn and the passengers scrambled back into the bus. Then she saw Ratna coming. “Today I’ve sold all the copies to the passengers of the first two buses,” he announced triumphantly.

“You must be praying that every day there should be news of a husband cutting off his wife’s nose,” Chhallo said.

“Yes, I’ve to match my wits against a woman’s nose!” Ratna laughed.

A new bus arrived. Two cars came soon after.

“I’ll go and make another round,” Ratna said.

“I’ll also go and try my luck,” Chhallo said.

“No. Chhallo, not you.”

"Are you mad? If I remain idle and sit here resting my one hand upon the other how will I...."

"Haven't I told you? I'll buy six of your baskets, my Chhallo, my cute one!" Ratna teased her by making a face at her.

"No, I must go. It can't go on like this every day. You know my father said I must sell twenty baskets today."

Ratna dashed off towards the bus and Chhallo proceeded towards the cars.

Half a seer meat, garlic, onions, green ginger, chillies how nice if she could buy all these things. Father would feel so pleased. Even if someone wants to buy a basket he changes his mind on seeing her face—the words echoed in Chhallo's mind.

She glanced at the man sitting in the car and hoped that her face did not look like a *lota* to him.

"Beautiful baskets, *babu*."

"Which baskets are you talking of?"

The man in the car gave Chhallo a quizzical look.

"Wait, at the moment I want only soda and not baskets. Go and fetch me soda and ice from that shop."

"Soda and ice!" Chhallo passed on the order to the shopkeeper in a loud voice. Then she drew closer to the car. "Beautiful baskets, *babu*."

The man in the car ignored the baskets. He just kept gazing at Chhallo. "Yes, beautiful baskets," he said.

"Then why not buy them?" she said. "They are only six annas each." She tried hard to keep that *lota*-like expression from appearing on her face.

The shop boy came with soda and ice. The man in the car opened a basket and taking out a bottle of whisky poured some of its contents into a glass.

Then sipping his whisky he turned to Chhallo.

"Only six annas each?" he asked.

"Yes, *babu*, six annas only. And if you buy two I'll make it ten annas."

"And if I buy four?"

"Four!" Chhallo started counting on her fingers. While count-

ing it occurred to her that mother Kartaro was right after all. If she just smiled people would readily buy her baskets.

The man in the car had emptied his glass. Handing back the glass and the money to the boy he started the engine.

"*Babu*, the basket?" Chhallo's hope had started fading.

"I don't mind buying the baskets but I don't have the change."

"I'll have the note cashed at the shop," she said.

"That small shop can't cash my note. I have only hundred-rupee notes."

Disappointed, Chhallo withdrew her hand from the car window.

"But there is a way out," the man in the car said, as if thinking hard.

Chhallo's hopes revived.

"There's a big petrol station some distance away from here where I'm going to buy petrol. I'll get the necessary change there."

"But I don't know the place. It may be very far from here."

"I'll take you there in my car. Beautiful baskets, these. I'll have the entire lot." The man opened the car door for Chhallo.

Chhallo hesitated. Then she remembered what her father had said to her that she should not let him down and try to sell at least twenty baskets. She quickly got into the car.

The car picked up speed. More speed. Then it left the metalled road and started racing along the dirt path.

"*Babu*, where is the petrol pump?" Chhallo was scared. Then she felt her breath stifled as the man pulled her into his arms. Her head reeled. Her arms which were struggling to be free of the man's embrace gave up the fight.

When Chhallo came to she found herself lying dishevelled under a tree. There was no car, no *babu*. Chhallo looked at her clothes and then at the baskets lying dumped in front of her. Everything was covered with dust.

She could lift her baskets with great difficulty. Dragging her feet which seemed to be weighing a maund each, she walked along the dirt path and gained the metalled road. A passing bus

stopped by her side, "Karnal?" the conductor asked her. Chhallo briefly glanced at the bus. "Yes," she nodded. She looked startled when the conductor asked her for the fare. She had no money to pay for it. And then she remembered. She had four annas in her pocket. She felt her pocket. The coin was missing. But instead she found a crisp ten rupee note.

Chhallo felt like jumping down from the running bus and killing herself. She thought of tearing up the note.

Seeing the girl lost in thought, the conductor took the note from her hand and said, "The fare is only five annas. I've enough money to change your note." He gave her the change which she put in her pocket, uncounted.

"Better count your money," the conductor said. But Chhallo had dozed off.

The bus stopped at the Karnal bus stop. Chhallo unwillingly proceeded towards her house.

The meat shop was at the corner of her lane. "Half a seer meat," she said in a faint voice and took out the money from her pocket.

Her mother was elated when Chhallo placed the meat and the other things on the shelf in the kitchen.

"How many baskets did you sell today?" she asked.

"The entire lot," Chhallo replied and started filling the bucket with water for a bath.

"That fellow. Ratna called. He was looking for you."

"Oh, was he?" Then she suddenly fell silent. Closing the door she started taking her bath. When she came out she saw Kartaro frying the mutton in the pot....

"I can smell the meat!" Chhallo's father said. "The house once again looks prosperous. I tell you on my word, a house where you don't have the smell of frying meat is no home." Then he cast a loving glance at Chhallo. "My Chhallo, my dear one!"

As Chhallo looked at the pot resting on the *chula* she felt as if her own smile was being fried in the pot.

Two Women

THE night comes day after day like a religious mendicant. She knocks on every door, asking for alms in the name of god. Or for a boon which makes dramas come true. If one obliges her she is happy. If a door is shut against her she does not cringe or linger but just moves on. Once when the night came—about four or five years ago—she forgot the bowl of darkness which she had been holding in her hand, outside a house.

In one of its rooms Vidya was in the throes of birth. She was on the verge of being a mother. That bowl has been lying there since then. Outside, as the sun rises, its warmth creeps into the room. The room shudders and sloughs off its coldness. Imbibing the heat the darkness also starts dozing...

Often, Vidya had thought of returning the bowl of darkness to the night when she knocked on her door like a mendicant. The bowl would be returned empty for Vidya had no dreams to put in it. On second thoughts she decided she would put a handful of her daughter's lisping talk in the bowl which she had left behind many years ago.

Tonight? No, perhaps it was a night four or five years ago. No, just tonight.

A woman was in the throes of birth. Sitting on the edge of her bed, she was massaging her abdomen to reduce her agony.

Vidya felt as if she were lying on the bed, groaning with pain

and the woman who was sitting on the edge of the bed was none other than Ms Rai, Dr Rai.

And then Vidya felt as if her body was devoid of any pain. She was quietly sitting on the edge of the bed and the woman who was lying on the bed and groaning was Ms Rai herself.

The room reeled and came to rest standing upside down.

No, the room was just as it was before. The bed was also there, exactly in the same position. Only the woman who had been lying on the bed and groaning had got up and was now standing upright by the side of the bed. And the woman who had previously been standing by the side, had fallen on the bed, convulsed in pain.

The feeble cry of a child.

It was the same cry which Vidya had once heard. She had lovingly looked at the child. On the first day all infants' faces look alike—like a lump of flesh which keeps slipping out of one's hands. Vidya's eyes scrutinized the soft lump of flesh just to find out whether it was a boy or a girl. Every woman scrutinizes a newly born lump of flesh so.

A boy!

No, it was a girl, it seemed.

The years gone by were sitting somewhere close by. They slowly broke into a grin.

The bowl of darkness also smiled.

Vidya was lost in thought. But not her limbs. They were not caught in the stranglehold of thoughts. She was in fact constrained by what she realized lay ahead of her. At this juncture Ms Rai needed her and she was therefore at her beck and call.

In the past when Vidya was confronted by such a situation, Ms Rai had come to her help. Not like a mother-in-law or like a sister or a sister-in-law, but in the form of a doctor. And now Vidya was at her disposal. Not in the guise of a doctor but like a mother, a sister or a sister-in-law. Or just like one woman to another woman.

There was a relationship between the two—an invisible bond which no eye could discern and no mind could perceive. The first

step was taken by Ms Rai. With closed eyes she had stepped across that relationship and had lent a helping hand to Vidya who was standing like a derelict along a deserted road. She had given Vidya the shelter under her own roof and had provided food and clothes. She had also given her baby daughter toys to play and books to read. Vidya had reciprocated the fine gesture. While sweeping the house she had also swept her relationship out of the house and dumped it in the garbage bin so that nobody would care to look at it or hear about it.

Now no relationship existed between the two. When free from her pain Ms Rai looked at the child lying in the crib. Then while gathering her things she glanced at Vidya.

She laughed "Vidya, do you remember the day when in this room...."

"Meeto was born."

"You had paid 13 days' rent for the room."

Both of them paused, expectantly.

Vidya placed a hot water bottle under Ms Rai's feet and folding up a blanket placed it across her shoulders. "I paid only 13 days' rent," Vidya laughed. "But you have paid the rent for your entire life."

One of the doors opened into the other room where Meeto was sleeping. Perhaps she had woken up on hearing some sound. Or she had walked in upon finding her mother's bed empty.

"Meeto, come here. I'll show you your brother," Vidya wiped Meeto's face with the end of her dupatta and led her to the crib.

Ms Rai looked up startled. She felt as if Meeto's eyes were seeking a relationship with the infant lying in the crib.

How easily Vidya had said, "Meeto, come here, I'll show you your brother."

Ms Rai felt like asking Vidya not to tell Meeto that he was her brother!

Meeto's brother. Ms Rai looked towards the crib. She felt as if the infant lying in the crib was not her own child—that he was really Meeto's brother. Perhaps Vidya was right in saying that he was Meeto's brother.

Today—if he had been here she would have lifted the boy and put him on his lap in the same manner. “Here, take your son,” she would have said.

But he was not here. However, wherever he might be, Meeto was his daughter and the boy his son.

Sweat broke out on her forehead.

“Vidya!”

“Yes.”

“What are you thinking?”

“Nothing.”

“This boy’s looks.”

“He has taken after you.”

“And Meeto?”

“She resembles me.”

A smile broke on Ms Rai’s face. This Vidya was a woman of few words, she always spoke so sparingly. Not that she spoke little. Perhaps she did not ever spend any time thinking. How easily she had said that the boy resembled her and the girl resembled Vidya.

Vidya made the boy lick a few drops of honey and then wrapping him up in a blanket, she said, “Stop brooding. Sleep a little.”

Ms Rai tried to sleep to stop herself from thinking. She was no stranger to brooding but such thoughts had never bothered her mind before. What had happened to her? And why? There were so many other women doctors in the city. Why had this Vidya come to her? Patients come and go. But this Vidya...Vidya had come to her as a patient and had gone away as a patient. But her husband had also come with her—like a husband accompanying a sick wife. That was not the end of it. He continued visiting her. Sometimes to get medicine for the child and sometimes for the child’s mother.

Ms Rai wiped her forehead with the towel. As she put back the towel near her pillow a sort of domestic woman’s smell came from her body—sweat, child, milk.

Perhaps he wanted to get away from that smell and maybe that

was the reason he had gone away from Vidya. And one day he returned unexpectedly. Like beads of perspiration Ms Rai's forehead became moist due to the train of her thoughts. He had spoken softly, silkily, and the gossamer threads never snapping, "My feet, unmindful of the slippery path they were treading, got enmeshed in that web."

Ms Rai felt sorry for her feet—the feet that had got themselves snared in that web inevitably and irrevocably. Feeling weary she closed her eyes; but her eyes still gazed into her inner depths. What kind of a relationship was it? You spread it out like a bedding and rolled it up like a bedding and one day it was lost somewhere at the railway station.

Ms Rai remembered everything in a jumbled sequence. He had stayed with her for a long time. Ms Rai pretended to herself that she had married him. The nursing home had been converted into a sort of a home for she had starting diverting all her private cases to the hospital where she was working. Two years, two-and-a-half years. He was engaged in writing a thesis. He dwelt in the pages of books which kept opening and closing all the time, confining himself to living within their covers. For a short while he dwelled in the flesh of her body.

Ms Rai's body was drenched in sweat. She felt like a passenger standing on a railway platform, who shoves his hand into his pocket only to discover to his horror that there is nothing in it. He had disappeared one morning.

"Vidya!"

"Yes."

"Did he play with Meeto?"

"No."

"Wasn't Meeto his daughter?"

'According to me, yes. She was very much a daughter to me but not to him.'

"Didn't he want a daughter, a son? You mean he wanted nothing?"

"No, nothing."

Ms Rai remembered a certain letter with foreign postmarks on

it. There were only two lines; "Whether I'll return or not I cannot say. Don't wait for me."

Ms Rai felt as if she was drowning in her thoughts. Perhaps he had not run away from Vidya but at the sight of Meeto's face. And then her brother's face put him off.

"Why do you keep thinking all the time?" Vidya interrupted in a soft voice.

"Didn't you take to brooding when he deserted you?" Ms Rai asked, her rueful voice breaking through a listless smile.

"I did think but not of him. It was of a male countenance that I kept thinking."

"Oh!"

"I kept thinking of a roof over my head. Of a roti on my plate."

Ms Rai was reminded of the Vidya of those days who, on getting news of Meeto's father, had come in search of him at Ms Rai's door. Not in search of him but in search of a roof over her head and a roti on her plate.

"Vidya!"

"Yes?"

"Your man—you must be thinking that I've snatched him away from you."

"But you have returned my man to me."

"What do you mean? How have I returned your man?"

"You have provided a roof over my head and a roti on my plate."

"I did it only to lighten the burden of my sins—to atone for them."

"The sin was his but you atoned for it although you were not obliged to do so."

Ms Rai's 'present' stepped away from her and stood apart from her. Away from her bed to be near the crib. "What am I going to do with this boy?"

"I'll bring him up."

"And I?"

"You? You are the man of the house."

The night had passed by the door like a religious mendicant making her daily round. Perhaps Ms Rai had dozed off. The day was about to dawn but the bowl of darkness was lying in the room as before.

Emerging from her room, Meeto had entered the other room, sobbing. The child in the crib was hungry and was crying for milk. Vidya proceeded to warm milk for him on the stove. Ms Rai felt as if two children had stepped out of that bowl of darkness and had started crying in the room.

The Third Woman

Biers are always carried out of the house. But when Meena came back home to live with her parents, the neighbours felt as if a bier had made a reverse trip into the house.

An official envelope bearing wax seals had arrived. It had the sinister implications of a shroud for Meena.

True, it did not carry the news of Meena's death; it only announced that her "gallant soldier" had become a casualty at the border. Like a shroud over a dead body, the news had put Meena under a pall of gloom.

There are things which women know as if by instinct. Meena knew for a truth that, in our country, as any where, a man dies only once. But here his *widow*, as long as she lives, dies many a time. So when Meena returned to her paternal home like a bier even the dumb walls seemed to moan over her plight. Her parents were struck dumb with grief, as if God had chopped off their tongues.

It was a spacious house—in fact, large enough to provide a separate room for each member of the family, big or small. Meena too had a room to herself and when she came home she went straight to it with an air of casualness, as if she were returning from college.

The doors of the rooms which casually opened and closed in the normal course of events now seemed to lie under a spell.

They opened only on special occasions—at weddings, births, deaths or when some member broke off from the family-fold.

Meena's parents looked at the passing family cavalcade, sometimes dry-eyed, at others with eyes brimming with tears.

Twenty years ago, when Meena's elder sister entered into holy wedlock and went away to live with her in-laws, the doors of the house seemed to have formally closed upon her for good. But two years later she returned to her old home for confinement, and it was the tiny hands of the new-arrival, as it were that opened the doors for her. But not for long. She died after forty days leaving the suckling babe to its fate. Death had again closed the doors upon her. Her in-laws took the infant under their wing but, unable to take proper care of him, they sent him back to his maternal home. Fate, working through those tiny hands, had again flung open the doors.

In the same way, twelve years ago, when Meena's brother had gone to another city to study at the university, the doors of the house had closed upon him only to open again after five years. He had come home with a girl of another community, whom he had married against his parents' wishes. Now a silk curtain hung across the door from behind which the smell of rich food such as *pillav* and cooked meat drifted outside the room. Hardly a year had passed when this chance marriage was followed by a sudden divorce, closing the doors upon them.

Now it was Meena. The doors that had closed upon her after her marriage was flung open by her own widowed hands.

She had gone from here in a bridal palanquin and had returned like a living corpse on a bier. Her old parents helplessly watched this sad spectacle. As if to be saved from such harrowing sights, Meena's old father's eyes had been blighted by cataract, depriving him of his vision.

Soon another envelope came, bearing official seals—not the harbinger of a shroud like the last one, but carrying glad tidings. It was like potted flowers suddenly smiling on the roof top. The government wanted to assist war-widows by offering land on which to build a house or by providing work as a means of live-

lihood. They could also get a loan to set up a small industry or take up a teaching job in an army school. Meena was asked to state her option.

To Meena, the letter had the implication of flowers strewn on a bier. She crumpled the letter in her hand. A part of her body had died somewhere inside her and the fragrance of flowers had no meaning for her. She would just keep lying on a *charpoy*, like a corpse.

Her dead sister's son, Avinash, who was studying at the university, and lived in the hostel, came home during the holidays. Now eighteen, he had not known a mother's love. When he came running to Meena, the flood gates of tears, which had remained closed for years, suddenly burst open. She hugged him and then clung to his neck and wept. As a child, Meena had carried him in her lap and seen him growing up. Now he was a fist taller than her and looked a man.

Every time her mother served her food, Meena would turn away her face; she had no urge to eat and would give up half-way. This time, Avinash brought her a *thali* heaped with food. "Get up, Meenu!" he said. "Please have your meal." Meena's hunger seemed to have flared up suddenly. It was not so much the smell of food that had awoken Meena's hunger. It was the magic of the word "Meenu" coming from Avinash's lips.

Everyone called her Meena or Meenaji. But Avinash had called her Meenu—the name that sparked off memories of the "gallant soldier."

In the scale of values she was junior to those who called her Meena and found herself elevated above those who addressed her as Meenaji. But Avinash, though ten years younger to her in age, had called her Meenu—and the mantle of a friend seemed to have fallen upon him, which had been exclusive to her husband, the "gallant soldier." He had lovingly called her Meenu. When he had died Meenu also died with him.

The next time Avinash called her "Meenu" she shrieked and placed her hand upon his lips. And then she suddenly removed her hand from his lips. Like the last breath of life, she wanted to

hear the sound of that word again.

Avinash fell silent but the word kept dangling before them as if in a vacuum.

There are many things the truth of which women know instinctively. And Meena knew as if by instinct that this word had no relation with her life, that it would never take tangible shape. Yet, though feeling lost, she would keep looking at Avinash from a distance.

When Avinash asked her to eat, she ate willy-nilly. When he tried to divert her mind with a game of carrom, she joined him half-heartedly. When they went out for a walk, she would walk under the shade of the trees like a shadowy figure.

Light had one kind of magic for her and darkness a magic of another kind; they wrapped themselves around her. Avinash, who was a whole fist taller than her cast over her the illusion of the "gallant soldier" under the magic of darkness and the same Avinash would, in the light, become the child whom Meena had dandled on her knee like a mother.

When a man dies, a woman's body may still remain alive but not her womb; it dies for ever. Meena felt the stench of her dead womb rising to her nostrils.

Then a longing took hold of her. If she could have given her "gallant soldier" refuge in her womb a vestige of him would have remained alive within her. Her regret at having missed that fateful moment tormented her body with the fierceness of a wild shriek.

Then came a day when light and darkness merged into each other. Lying in her bed in her room, Meena looked steadily at Avinash's face.

Avinash seemed to have two faces. He had the face of Meena's husband and another of the child she would have had by her husband. One was no more in this world and the other would never be born. But she looked with fascination at those two shadowy faces. They seemed to be vaguely familiar.

Then, in a sudden moment of lucid consciousness, she realised that what she was looking at were not shadows but real faces.

One was the face of Avinash—young, manly and alert. The other was the lingering memory of the child Avinash, whom she had rocked in her arms and her relationship with whom went back eighteen years.

There was also a hazy moment emerging through her semi-consciousness, telling her that what she beheld before her eyes was only a man, and she only a woman whose womb was craving for that man and the reality of his existence inside her.

The light and darkness became one and with it the torment of her conflicting desires was suddenly resolved. A woman's arms stretched out and eagerly groped for a man's arms. Flesh felt the familiar smell of flesh.

A woman's garments and a man's tremblingly fell from the *charpoy* in a heap, taking the shape of a person sitting with bowed head.

It was not the quietude of a soul meeting a soul. It was a harrowing moment, replete with destiny, when a woman had trampled over her womanhood in quest of the unattainable and a man, all in jitters, was making a bid to outgrow himself in one manly leap.

The moment of destiny passed. Meena died a new death and with her Meenu also.

All night two women lay together in the same bed, incriminating each other for the other's death.

In the morning the woman who came out of the room was a third woman. She smoothed out a crumpled piece of official paper and signed her name along the dotted lines, signifying her willingness to take up a school mistress's job in a remote hill station.

After a few days, a room of the house which one fateful event had flung open was banged shut by another event. Meena was gone, perhaps never to return.

Seven Hundred and Twenty Steps

THE darkness intensified in density with each advancing step. The blue shirt and slate-grey trousers that he wore gradually merged into the deepening greyness around. Only the white keds on his feet stood out distinctly apart....

He looked at them—kept looking at them in fact as if he had all along stood at one place and the feet had gone on step by step, ahead.... And he felt as if he had not only kept looking at them but had been counting each move.

Seven hundred and twenty was the figure on his lips.. .

He could not say when exactly the metalled road had come to an end and when exactly he had mechanically gone on to the dusty track. He had obviously begun, the count directly he had stepped out of his house...and that quite as obviously had accounted for the figure seven hundred and twenty.... This synchronised exercise had now however come to an abrupt stop since the path under his feet had. It led nowhere on from here. All around him was the cluster of trees up to which he had zig-zagged his way. In the dead centre of this arboreal setting was the ancient, dilapidated well.

The wind had perhaps become keener and colder. The leaves

jostled and clashed as if from each of them a settled voice was being shaken off and awakened into the now soft, now raucous babel heard.

Truer perhaps was it to say that each and every one of them was endowed with its own voice. Some few shook and fell at his motionless feet...moving around even when fallen—as if with all their hustle and bustle they were trying to communicate something pointedly to him...His head bent over so slightly and politely first, then further down to listen. And a combined force of countless voices rose, rushed through his ears and on to his head till he felt it go absolutely dizzy....

And one broke off,—the wings of a huge big vulture wildly flapped above him first, then... each bone in his body began to ache—so badly as if it had kept its suffering suppressed for years....

Words of abuse that Nita from one side and his own brother from another had hurled at him—began shooting out non-stop from his ears until he clamped the palms of his hands firmly onto them. A little while later, he slowly tried to concentrate on hearing Nita's alone... only to realise that hers had been sealed by his own lips—and try no matter how hard he might, these he simply could not prise open....

How often and how free and fair were the sessions he had with her—until that fateful day when his big brother had come across his letter in a book and had had him sent for. Shutting him up in a room how he had sworn at him! Nita's voice had been pent up: sunk forever since he had been beaten sore....He had not heard a squeak from that day on....

He tried to recall her voice: exerting to the full all his powers of concentration—but no, not the faintest echo of it could he hear....

All at once then, clashing voices began to lash out at him and laugh him harshly into a state of sheer desperation....

Like splashes and splashes they were—more like filthy, slimy vomits from foul mouths...gobs floating....

Such a stomach-turning upsurge had been aimed at his back—

but he had dodged and run with all speed his legs could muster to save himself from being messed up. Breathing hard, he had a choking feeling when he came to a halt. His eyes seemed to have fallen out of their sockets and smudged his face with their jelly.

The ink on the scrap of paper in his hand had gone all blotched and smeared with his sweat,—yet the soot-black words that the Principal of his College had spouted, pierced his ears: “You have been rusticated!” And all the clamped-down voices of the hostel burst into shrill cries and wild catcalls once he was out of the gates. No matter how hard he ran for his life, they chased him flat out of breath in no time....

How long was it since he had been a student? Five years perhaps. Since then had they lain prostrate in his head....Or perhaps they had penetrated deeper down and settled in the soles of his feet....

He could not remember. All he could remember was that he never had since been able to stand still in one place for long; nor, for that matter, could they find rest or respite when he lay down to sleep. Quite often he found himself pacing up and down, down and up, from wall to wall straight, or diagonally across from corner to corner, night after night, in his room. From fear he might sleepwalk his way out and harm himself, his mother had no other go but to make sure the door was secure from outside....

After so long now had the same voices swarmed up from the soles of his feet back into his head...and reined him into a halt. His entire frame shook frenziedly: more like a beam—propped roof that a clambered-up crowd shook with their weight....

A certain classmate, Ashok, sprang up to mind. He had slung his arm consolingly into his and walked up to a point alongside. When he too had fallen off and where to gone, he could not tell....

‘No. The Principal broke him away from me when he made me stand—all by myself—under the fierce, strong light of his office.’

And the stern voice still made him shiver, "Answer....How long have you been taking Ashok to your room?"

He remembered having called him one night to his cubicle for studying together till the early hours of the morning. Fagged out, they had ended up by snuggling into the one bed between them for the little time they had left until the morning, when Ashok's slender, soft body had brought up Nita's to his mind. He had put the sleeping friend's arm around his neck and had slid his hand from his shoulders, back and loins down to his legs....

Then had come another night....

And another....

It was strange that a stage had come when Ashok began to bear so strong a resemblance to Nita in his eyes that he had become her alter ego. For the first time that night he had kissed her lips....

No, not Nita's, Ashok's....What a mix-up....

He used to sleep in his underclothes. But when the Principal had made him stand in the glare of the tube-light and cross-examined him on their relationship, for the first time in his life had he been subjected to the humiliation of being stripped off down to the last stitch and made to stand till he shook from shame and shivered from cold.

He had tried to speak but his voice subsided into silence after a desperate stammer. Since then, for the last five years, he had never been able to get a straight word out of his mouth.

The Principal had shoved a note into his hand and marched him out where the hostellers waited to launch an all-out attack. Not unlike dammed-up waters breaking free from a flooded pool, they sprang into action—with whistles and jeers and scoffs till he had fled from their sight. The sharps and flats of their voices struck his back. His temples throbbed and his head all but exploded from acute pain and strain....

So often afterwards had he gotten into the habit of pressing his forehead: of pressing it hard for relief. So often had he since been having the periodic feeling of a vein bursting open and blood trickling down his nose and jaws.

He recalled the time his father had taken him to the neurologist who had drugged him with those red sugar-coated pills. Since then had he been wandering around in a sort of protracted stupor.

No, not entirely in a stupor. He remembered that however and wherever he had gone around, his conscious self stayed wide awake and absolutely alert. When Theresa, for instance, had given him word that she would marry him with the proviso that his father transferred the deed of the house to his name, he had been able to see through her far-sightedness. "And what then?" He had countered her conditional offer. "Would you then force me to transfer it to yours? Is that your game?" And she had mocked: Mr. Stammer!

Trust me to manage the house better than you ever could! I'll have it renovated and decorated every year what—do you know!" "You have two dogs. What do you know?" He had hit back, "I'll be a third wagging my tail hard behind you...."

A strange thing had happened meanwhile. He scooped out from his Pool of Memories, the neurologist who had drugged him with the red sugar-coated pills and to whom he had been having to go regularly for check-ups, had himself undergone a transformation beyond recognition. He had gone on staring unbelievably into the medico's face. The flat, Mongolian nose he'd had, had been replaced by a real high Roman one! Unable to accept such humbugging, in vain had he entreated his father to change over to another's treatment. He was sure of a cure at another's hands. But his pleas went renting the air in vain. Maddening was it to hear his father try convincing him of the third change of hands in a row. That estranged him. He contended that he had been under the treatment of the one and the same practitioner all along. 'Witch doctor!' All he had done was change red pills for green and green for yellow just as easily as he changed his own face....

And then he had heard him say one day that he was switching him on to shock therapy. It clearly meant that the unprincipled practitioner was out to electrocute him. That was why he had

hurriedly gone and bolted himself up. His mother had called out to him to eat, but he knew that once he opened his door, his father would pounce on him and drag him under the ruse of treatment. So he had stoutly stood in his own defence and taken the plate of food through the window bars.

The second day his mother had hammered at his door to have his room cleaned up. Then too he had as firmly declined. These were all wiles and guiles to get him somehow. So, even when he needed his packet of cigarettes, he put the money on the sill for the servant to run that errand for him.

That the deceitful fellow had trotted off with his meagre treasure, was entirely another matter.

Long enough had he been rooted to the spot—fishing in the deep, unfathomed Pool of Memories. So many voices that had sunk began to surface now. One floated across to the bank.... Which one was this? What had it to say? Where had Kashni's voice come from? "Suni Babu! Hey... Suni Babu!" He remembered that whenever the dhobi's daughter came, she would make it a point to address him as "Suni Babu!" So often would he enunciate his name clearly for her to grasp. 'Not Suni—Sunil!' A futile lesson. She could never get across to the 'l'. That letter of the alphabet was simply beyond her.

On that particular day she however decided to stand under the barred window and softly call out to him. She had brought a packet of cigarettes hidden in her veil. He had turned his coat and trouser pockets inside out. A mere 25 paise piece was all he'd been able to salvage from the odd things stuffed in. And that surely could not square up accounts. She, for her part stolidly refused to accept even that part payment. Rather, the following day when she had come with the wash, she brought yet another gift packet! From that day on he realised that he liked being called "Suni" rather than "Sunil!"

Oh yes! And another thing....At her instance, he had come round to opening the door. She had then swept and dusted the room and carried off the bundle of his soiled clothes. And when she had returned with the well-laundered lot and he had gone to

change in the bathroom attached she had peeped in with words of admiration: a feast to his starved self. "That's a wonderful body you have, Suni Babu!"

His memories got flooded with slurps of "Suni Babu". He pressed his forehead with the palm of his hand. He felt as if the voice had brought on a regular trickle of blood.... He stared at the palm of his hand, but in the dark he could not tell if it had been stained or not....

He remembered a blot of it on the sheet that particular time when she had quickly balled it up and returned fresh and clean the next day. Innocently he had pelted her with the repeated question how that had happened but she had only stuffed her mouth with the corner of her veil and chortled with a merry twinkle in her eyes....

She had come to him ever so often then. But how had she died? Why did she have to die? His mother and servant and the man who owned that tiny little tea shop under the peepul tree had told him turn by turn that she had jumped into a well....

As the Gordian knot uncut, so the tightly-stretched vein in Sunil's forehead shuffled off the question then on everyone's lips. Kashi was unmarried—how come she carried a child?... as he set out to seek the solution. Kashi's baby? Glow-worms lit up the branches of the tree overhead. Some glimmer of a light came on and went off in Sunil's mind. 'Was she carrying my child?....Mine?' He wondered why that had never struck him before.

And he thought of that very eventful morning. In the village-common opposite his house, so many children had been a good while at play as he stood and watched. In the early sunshine, a girl of three or so dazzled pure white like a lovely little flower in her trilly frock. He had lifted her lovingly up in his arms and smothered her from head to foot in kisses. She bubbled with laughter thoroughly enjoying herself, when a demoniac hulk of a dark woman slashed the calm air with her screams. Her ayah, it probably was, to whip up such a scene....

Bewildered and baffled, his arms had begun to tremble with

the crowds closing in upon him and *snatching the girl away*. Her mother's terrifying cries as she banged the door of her house shut in his face, arose from the same Pool of Memories. His father's final decision to pack him off to the lunatic asylum was the upshot to it all.

Sunil dived deeper into the Pool. 'Perhaps that act of mine was really thought of the flesh of my flesh that had lain on the floor-bed of the subconscious. Had Kashni remained alive, mine might well have grown like that white-frosted little girl.... Why did Kashni die? Why did she have to?.... Why did I not...?

And where is that well?

The path that under his feet had come to a dead-end at the tumbledown brickwork of the well, he unconsciously began scrimmaging. He remembered what people then said—that she had jumped over the ramshackle masonry.... The description fitted to a T. Was this the same well?.... Could there be another like it? He looked around. But for the trees, there was nothing else.... Nothing, but the leaves falling....

And then with lightning quickness it flashed across his ratlebrain that the path took off from the metalled road going past the back of his house. He had probably come along that.... The well then, it followed, was the same.

For a few moments, he felt his mind perfectly relaxed. The cause of his restlessness—when he had paced up and down his room—was really on his way to finding this place.

How near it was.... Hardly seven hundred and twenty paces.... He had counted each step. Seven hundred and twenty...to be precise. And he wondered why his feet had not taken him there much before....

'That was why I used to hear a voice from over the compound wall! I could never tell whos ... The mystery is solved. It was Kashni calling out: "Suni Babu! Suni Banu!" '

He took another step forward and peered into the well. Glass bangles jangled and he shrieked, "Kash-ni!"

After how many years was it that his voice had not stammered? And he laughed. He was at heart's ease as he had never

before been. A warm glow overcame him as if it was after ages that he had found his way home to find his wife and child waiting to welcome him. He flung his arms wide as if to embrace them....

The trees around heard a cry as of a human voice and quivered like the leaves on their branches....

On Banks and Shoals

AN Episode flowing down River Time—got stuck on the bank of an Era: exactly where and when the Rishi Veda Vyasa had once sat in meditation in a forest.

The moment his power of concentration was disturbed, he opened his eyes and saw Rani Satyavati standing—as ravishingly charming as ever, but deeply sorrowful.

Like the leaves of the tree under which he sat, he bent in salutation: “My eternally beautiful Mother why this sorrow writ on your face—tell me?”

The mother drew him lovingly to her breast. You’re from the Rishi Dynasty. You’ve no idea what agony love can cause in a human heart. I’ve inherited the love of ruling in right royal manner from Raja Santanu himself...for to continue with the dynastic line of descent, I gave birth to you from the same womb I brought forth the other two of the Raja’s sons. But alas, one of the princes got killed in battle; the other fell victim to an incurable disease. What happens to the two inconsolable Ranis? Mustn’t their destinies run the... courses—I ask you?”

All the withered leaves of the trees clustered down to look searchingly into Veda Vyasa’s face.

Rani Satyavati’s mind began flowing with the gentle waves of the Ganges River. Maha Rishi Parasher had taken me to him like these waters. You are a pearl from the bay of the same stream.

Playing on the sands and shoals, you wandered freely in and out of these groves and bushes you made all yours. You've no notion what the love for a gem in a crown can be."

Like the rays of the sun enamelling the softly-swaying green foliage around, a smile hovered around Veda Vyasa's lips. "True, I've no notion of what love for a kingdom can be; yet I can conjecture somewhat a mother's love...."

Satyavati bent low down like the ends of the creeper climbing the tree. "The gem in a crown needs must have a throne, the throne needs must have a ruler. Both my daughter-in-laws are widows today, I come as an emissary of theirs to ask the boon of a son each from you."

Veda Vyasa raised his eyes to the tree spread overhead, and the branches and leaves all bent low down as if in search of their seeds on the earth.

The Rishi's lips parted in a knowing smile. "The commands of both Mother and Earth shall be obeyed".

Veda Vyasa fulfilled his promise. He bequeathed a son each to Ambika and Ambalika.

Like the shrill delight of children in play, when the waters cascaded down the rocks, the same Episode moved along in and out the creeks and bends of Time until it came to a halt at the bank of Kali Yuga,—right there where Baldev's simple, little hut stood: there where on a rough wooden table lay Camus, Kafka and Pasternak; the Mahabharata drew a conspicuous blank.

And right in front, his friend Kashinath came and stood like a broken leaf fluttered to a spot on the ground. "My prayer—the Lord Almighty has not been able to grant; the herbal medicine from a Vaid has not been of any use. I've come to ask therefore the boon of a son from you."

There was no tree overhead. But Baldev's ears got filled with sounds as from rustles of leaves.

Kashinath was saying. "The healthful body of my wife has been yoked to a cursed diseased man. Rid her of this affliction for a fleeting moment, my Friend!"

Baldev's entire frame became as knotted and gnarled as the

roots of a giant tree. Like a leaf fallen *with the drift of the wind*, Kashinath fell at his feet. "This secret shall remain sealed in my heart, yours, and hers! None else would know, I vow."

This little shoot sprouted from the knotted and gnarled body of Kashinath's—'Perhaps as the Chronicle of Time ascribes...I am perhaps a Veda Vyasa... a Rishi....'

Thus the Episode travelled down from Era to Era. And from the broken, fluttering leaves, a Dynasty of flowers sprung forth.

A son was born to Kashinath. Friends and relations came with their blessing and good wishes. And when Baldev bent and took a look at the new-born in the cradle, his lips got sealed like Veda Vyasa's.

No, no...No! I'm no Veda Vyasa!" With that fierce denial, Baldev's dream broke and he woke up.

The unfinished bottle of drink still stood on his bedside table. With trembling hands he poured some more into the glass and gulping it down, madly muttered: "Your line of descent was from the Gods, Veda Vyasa...not from that of Common Man. And that makes some difference, doesn't it?"

Baldev's imagination drifted far into the Forest of Centuries. And with an uncommon Wail as from the Deep, he lamented: Rishi Raja! You have the Power of Meditation...of Meditation undefiled I have dreams, only dreams. A medley of fantasies....

The words from Baldev's lips echoed with the winds passing through the trees. Look Rishi! Look at me! Here...see... here is my Ambika. You had stopped recognising your Ambika soon enough....Mine is different. To me, he is a living reality.... She is my very own Ambika: a part of my existence.... Wherever I go, she is with me." And laughing heartily, he continued: "Look Rishi! You have no shadow. People speak the truth when they say that the Devtas...The Divinities above have no shadows. Man alone has the curse of having them following him. See for yourself—mine, in fact, is larger than life...."

His resonately rising voice clashed against the Silence of Centuries and subsided like tidal billows sadly into a deep stillness. "Your period of meditation was over the moment Satyavati

called out to you. Why does my voice not penetrate your ears? Why must it be so? You never picked your boy from Ambika's lap into your arms. I have...I have held him close to my heart. You do not know what it means to break away from one who is flesh of one's flesh...."

Baldev's body got bathed in streaming, steaming blood. "You do not know the odour of blood, Rishi! Man's blood has it more pronouncedly when he is wounded to the depths. And blood has a pleasant enough aroma too when tender lips open in innocent laughter. That is when one discovers 3 common scent between father and son."

And a stronger, more powerful scent flowed down the bulging veins of Baldev's forehead. Stupefied he spoke.

No matter where my Ambika takes her fragrance with her, I can find her out. I feel her spasms and sighs resting on my arms... against my shoulders... lingering on my neck like a precious trust reposed in me. Don't you see that I had quaffed deeply at her lips once?...."

A vein in his forehead stood out with the strain of an indefinable pain. He bit his lower lip and said. "You knew only to give, Rishi. You could never have known what it was to receive...to accept feelingly. I have lived through it all: through that unique experience. When I descended into the various depths of my Ambika, those very depths had taken me tightly into their grip, and when they unfolded again like the petals of an effoliating flower, I brought back with me their varying shades of odours. That was an intense moment when I awakened to the give-and-take strands entwining a tie. I have lived through that intensity of experience. Rishi...You have not. There is not half as much pain in giving as there is in receiving. You do not—you cannot know what that pain is, Rishi!"

A stillness reigned all around. Around...far away...he could envisage the Future through the deep stillness. He could see it containing the remaining years of his life...just an endless...a darkness of impenetrable silence. But in that darkness, Baldev shut himself up and sank to a deeper spot of darkness. Once

settled down to the Region of Darkness, his lips began quivering,...as if with them the layers of darkness...were beginning to be disturbed.

“She had come for a spark of fire from me. For the sake of that spark I had to burn. And burn I well did. But I did not know, nor did she for that matter, that we would—each of us go through that Ordeal of Fire. She had shivered when touched by it, and for support had yielded herself entirely to one as if embarrassed by the flame that had arisen from her. And now I find she has left the ashes of her burnt-out fire mingled in mine. See for yourself, Rishi Raja!

An apparition of a sort took shape (from my state of consciousness): a sort of a stone idol out of the darkness. Perhaps time had really turned it into stone...or so it appeared perhaps because it was still in a state of deep meditation.” Baldev stretched his arm out in the darkness to touch the feet of the form reverently. And his voice shook like his groping arm. “I crave your pardon, Rishi Raja! I forgot myself when I, a mere human tried to imitate you. For a fleeting moment, I tried identifying myself with you. For a fleeting moment only I stole your prayer-mat, only to realize that I am I and that I cannot be you. The serenity of your all-pervading presence can still be felt in the forest: I am in utter contrast, tossing about in my state of restlessness, and that is because I have to bear the burdensome curse of being at both giving and receiving ends—I want my Ambika as well as my child by my side. My eyes can see not only ahead but far back to the time when Ambika was with me leaning against my side....and I was getting a new span of life in and through her.

Baldev nodded from his comatose state of consciousness back into sleep. The silence in the room took a breath of relief. Only the soft wind blowing in from the open window shook the pages of the open book on the table as if Canto Five of the Mahabharata were establishing rapport with Camus’ Outsider and as if Pasternak’s Zhivago were rubbing eyes on learning from Maharishi Parasher the secret of converting the offensive Matsya (Fish) odour into pleasant aroma.

Suddenly the silence of the room shivered and looked intently at Baldev. With feelings fermenting literally to a point of torment, he rose up from his bed murmuring, "What is this curse, Veda Vyasa. I seem to be burning whenever I go to sleep. Not only I, Ambika too. And I wake up always to a heap of ashes. How on earth will my boy trace out his genealogy from ashes, I ask you?"

And the river flowed on as before. Only the ripples flowing on sadly witnessed the Episode being reduced to handful of dust and ashes on a bank.

270 Crore Heartbeats

SUREKHA removed the mangal sutra. Her heart was beating so hard that she felt it would stop with her next breath.

She remembered having read somewhere that a Tibetan Lama had once said that the heart of a star beats about 270 crore times and then it dies. Counting the past years, she felt she had passed through a series of frightening experiences and her heart had beaten so many times that it was at the end of its count. And like the star she too would fall.

That Konkani girl, when she first bloomed into womanhood, standing near the window of the house on the seashore, had felt her whole being encompassed by the storm that had rushed through the window.

This was the love for her beloved Raj, who was a young Maharashtrian. That was the reason why her father didn't accept the marriage.

This was the storm that had entered her being and catching hold of Raj's hand she had said: "Only the souls meet. It is not a meeting of castes and regions".

But from my mother's mother and her mother I have inherited a deep-rooted custom and to honour it you must put a mangal sutra around my neck.

She knew Raj was not earning. It was for this reason that she went and bought a mangal sutra made of artificial beads for

10 rupees.

This marriage was not acceptable to her father. But when a baby girl was born, her father's anger melted into filial love. He wanted to give her all that was left by her dead mother. In the meantime, her step mother had arrived. She was against giving her anything. At that time Surekha had told her father: "I don't want anything but my heart will be at peace if you give me my mother's mangal sutra. My mother did not die a widow and I too would like to die similarly."

When she possessed that mangal sutra, Surekha felt as if she had been blessed by God for a long life for Raj. Probably God had given him the years. It was a long struggle to find employment. After a while Raj, in desperation, wanted to return the years back to God.

Those were the days of struggle. Surekha pawned her mangal sutra and kept the fire burning at home. Then taking a job she managed to run the house. On the other hand, the thought that he could not provide for his wife and two children began to eat into his mind.

Drowning his sorrow in the bottle, one day he returned his life to God.

Surekha could have brought back the mangal sutra from the pawnbroker with the money she had saved. But the hands that could put the mangal sutra around her neck were not there. So it remained in the iron box at the pawnbroker's.

After many years her life took a new turn. A man put out his hand towards her and said: "I have two small wailing babies who have no mother. Can you be a mother to them? And you have two children who need a father.

Surekha laughed; in fact I was a shrill scream. She said: "My mangal sutra died in the pawnbroker's iron box. I am alive but the mangal sutra is dead".

That man brought his dead wife's mangal sutra.

"Let us reawaken dead tokens." Saying so, he put both his children in Surekha's lap. Surekha looked at the heavens in surprise.

She now had another heavy, golden mangal sutra. Looking at it closely, she found it had been repaired at three places. Probably, it had broken thrice and thrice it had been repaired. It seemed that life was to be lived in bits and pieces. She wore the mangal sutra.

A short time passed when she realised she had been deceived. He was a hypocrite, neither her husband nor the father of her children. And when he pocketed all her earnings, Surekha removed the mangal sutra and put it in her empty hands. While returning it to him she felt that her heart had beaten 270 crore times and like a star, it had fallen now.

She did not know when she returned to that house along with her children where her many past years were hanging from the nails on the walls.

The days came and passed. Surekha felt she was like the ashes of the fallen star.

But one day when she was sleeping between her children she felt as if their gentle breath were trying to find a spark in the ashes. Suddenly deep within her she felt that searing heat! She remembered that after 270 crore heart-beats the star that turns into ashes produces a spark—for a new star!

Like a new-born star she removed all the past sad years of her life which were hanging from the nails on the walls.

The very next morning she went out and bought a new mangal sutra. Standing before the mirror, wearing the mangal sutra around her neck with her own hands, she said: "Today I have worn this mangal sutra with my own hands. It can neither divorce me nor make me a widow."

The Other One

CHAMPA bloomed on every branch but each branch was beyond Kannu's reach. Even standing on her tip toes, she couldn't reach the flower. Kannu remembered mother telling her that the plant was as old as she was. Kannu then wondered that if we are of the same age then how come I am small and the plant has grown so big.

The boundary wall was lower in height than the plant. Kannu thought that by climbing the wall, she would be able to pluck some flowers. So to climb the wall she collected a heap of stones at the base of the wall. But still her hands hardly reached the top of the wall, so she couldn't climb it.

When Shri Krishna entered the outer gate he saw Kannu hanging on the right hand side of the wall with her fingers. She could neither climb the wall nor come down. Shri Krishna ran and lifted her from the wall. Then raised her up with his arms so that Kannu could pick a bunch of flowers. Clutching the bunch of flowers, she asked as she was being lowered, uncle mother says I am as old as the champa so why am I, still so small.

Shri Krishna knew Kannu disliked drinking milk. Whenever her mother poured her milk Kannu would start playing hide and seek. Sometimes she would hide behind the door, sometimes under the cot. For this reason Shri Krishna started to say, "Children are like the mango tree, they grow tall slowly but if

they drink milk they grow tall quickly ”

“But does the mango tree drink milk?” Kannu asked. Taking her hand he took her inside saying, “I’ll show you a photograph of a mango tree who drank milk and grew big.”

“I’ll also drink milk today,” and releasing her hand from Shri Krishna’s grasp she ran as if she had found the secret of life.

In the drawing room, the vase was still there in which Kannu’s mother used to put flowers every day but for the last six months it was bare of flowers. When Kannu was about to place the bunch of flowers in the vase, she saw that her hand was covered with the sap and that the sap was oozing from the broken ends of the stems.

“Mama, the flowers are weeping.” “Kannu kept the bunch of flowers on the table and looked towards where her mother sat. Her mother looked once towards the flowers, at Kannu and then closed her eyes as she remembered the pain.

Shri Krishna was coming behind Kannu. Hearing his footsteps Kannu’s mother opened her tear stained eyes. Half rising she asked Shri Krishna to be seated and then once again sank in her chair, saying in a faint voice, “On one side fate troubles and on the other side the innocent questions of children. Kannu brought these flowers and she says they are crying.”

The mothers voice filled with grief, the grief Shri Krishna courageously had stemmed when it had fallen on the house six months ago. He said, “Kannu, wouldn’t you tell your Mama what I told you.” “Mama uncle says that children are like the mango tree, if they drink milk they grow up quickly, so I’ll drink milk too.”

A smile brightened her mothers face. Looking at Kannu first, she then looked at Shri Krishna with eyes full of gratitude which thanked him for the support in the hour of need.

Getting some strength, she rose from the chair and asked Kannu, “Shall I get you some milk?”

“Yes! And some water for the flowers too.” Kannu was saying when Shri Krishna said, “Come Kannu we’ll get the water and at the same time clean up the vase too.”

The mother while going hesitated on the threshold, stopped and looked towards the photo of Kannu's father on the wall, at the broken tree of her life, and then at Kannu, the broken flower of the branch.

Kannu picked the flowers from the table and Shri Krishna the vase, in whose fate, for the last six months there had been no flowers. After washing the vase on the outer tap of the kitchen he was putting the flowers in the vase, Kannu's mother while warming the milk thought that Shri Krishna is like that water which at least for a while can put life into the plucked flowers.

While warming the milk she began to make a cup of tea. Like the water something inside her came to a boil, "On death, one can share the grief for a day, a week but after that everyone goes away and forgets."

Look at Shri Krishna, he is no relation of us but was the friend of the one who died. Yet he still comes, enquires about us. But for how long will he keep on asking. The drop from the boiling water falling on her, brought her back to reality.

When she brought the milk and two cups of tea into the room, a faint smell could be perceived in the air, of the days gone by, when Kannu's father was alive. It was the first days when she drank her milk quickly. And she said, "Mama you never play cards with me, like Papa used too. And look, uncle has said that he'll play cards with me today."

She had lost all appetite for drink and food. And today when she took the cup of tea in her hand, she felt a strong desire for a hot sip.

Kannu only knew one game which she played with her father. It was necessary that Kannu win while papa lost. Kannu's card game was played so that she could win. When she would run after her father asking him to play, he would pretend run in front of her pretending "I'll not play because I'll loose." And when she persuaded him to play she would be so happy, as if she had convinced her father to lose.

And today when Kannu began playing with Shri Krishna, she was aghast at finding that her cards were much smaller than Shri

Krishna's. Her small face became red with anger. Shri Krishna realised his mistake and when he again started to deal the cards, he gave Kannu all the aces, the Kings, the queens etc. Kannu's lost faith was soon restored and within no time she became Kannu of the old. And the mother too felt as if she was seeing this Kannu after six months.

"Uncle has lost," "Uncle has lost," hearing the joyful cries of Kannu even the sad dull walls of the house brightened up.

In the days to come Kannu visited lots of places with Shri Krishna, sometimes to the circus, sometimes she ate an ice cream or she went out to buy a new pair of shoes. And when her mother wanted to enroll her in a school, Kannu refused to go unless uncle Krishna took her.

And then an incident occurred. A little away from the house was a public park where she went to play with the neighbours daughter. While climbing towards the dome in the corner of the park, she slipped on the stair and broke her leg.

It was a small town, where one could only call a hakim in emergencies. And when the hakim wanted to set the bone he asked Shri Krishna to hold the legs of the screaming Kannu.

"Leave my legs alone uncle," she screamed but when he didn't she let out a stream of all the bad words she knew at Shri Krishna. The bone was set, the bandages were in place and when Kannu woke up next morning there was not much pain. This was an incident which left a mark on Kannu. The next day while setting in his lap she said, "Uncle now you are my papa."

Shri Krishna gently kissed her brow for he felt that the words he wanted to say had been spoken by Kannu. And then for assurance, he looked towards Kannu's mother.

Kannu's mother feeling embarrassed, quickly said, "This is your uncle, your father is there," indicating towards the photograph on the wall.

Kannu looked at the wall and then snuggling into Shri Krishna she said, "He is also my papa." And Shri Krishna embraced Kannu.

It became known that war widows were being helped with

land and finance to construct houses. Kannu's mother had to go to the city to fill up some forms in that connection. When she came back, she was not alone. With her had come an officer having the same rank as that of her husband; to help her in the paper work. Shri Krishna kept on coming and as usual played with Kannu. But after some days he remarked to Kannu—"We will not play here, we'll play in the park". In the park he dealt as usual and as usual Kannu kept on winning. But one day Kannu remarked, "Uncle you don't laugh anymore. Is it because you are loosing the game everyday."

Shri Krishna realised that his eyes had become wet at Kannu's question....Perhaps something broke inside and had surfaced up in the eyes. Embracing Kannu he said, "Perhaps we both have lost."

From the courts, of the city the news came and spread all over that Kannu's mother had married that officer. The court marriages' knowledge had already been acknowledged by Shri Krishna's heart, so when the court too confirmed the news Shri Krishna hung his head and resigned to his fate.

After many days once when he was passing through the market near Kannu's house he saw her standing all by herself. He couldn't resist himself, so going to her he lifted her up in his arms and said, "What are you doing out in this cold at this time of the day."

In Kannu's hand there was a rupee note. Showing it she said that papa had given it to her and asked her to go and buy some toffees. Shri Krishna bought some chocolates and gave it to her. Then lifting her up in arms took her to her house. Kannu didn't know as to how long Shri Krishna stood outside in the darkness, saying over and over again "I told you Kannu, we both have lost....We both have lost."

After that they all lost touch with each other.

Shri Krishna doesn't know that when Kannu went into coma she kept on saying "where is my papa, where is my papa. And when her mother pointed and said "Look here is your papa." Kannu would turn her head away saying, "Not him, the other one."

Mamta

AFTER leaving Jagdish, Mamta took up a teaching job in a government school and started living in the teachers' quarters. Except for taking her class and studying in the library, she had no other interests. She rarely stepped out of the school campus, almost becoming a recluse.

One day, she was sitting in her bed, reclining against the wall. Moonlight was coming through the half-drawn curtains of the window. The light had been switched off.

Mamta was staring at the light blue walls. They looked soft and pleasant. Then, suddenly, the walls were gone and she saw a vast expanse of blue water in the form of a wide, placid river. She felt as if her cot was floating like a boat.

Soon, she saw some nebulous figures moving on the distant shore. Gradually, as the mist cleared, she recognised a face. It was Dev's.

Dev's face had a clean, shining look. His handsome features had mellowed somewhat by suffering and separation and his tall figure looked slender and fragile.

Mamta's eyes were fixed on Dev's face which was still aglow with love. With tears rolling down her cheeks, she said in a soft voice: "Farewell, my dear, farewell! I wish I could come to you. I've no strength. The waves are strong and cruel, the shore is far away. Farewell!"

Mamta moved on. After some time, she saw another figure. It was Jagdish's. The furrows on his broad forehead had deepened. His lips had lost colour. His eyes, though sunken, were full of love and sympathy, of grief and censure, of prayer and entreaty.

She couldn't stand his pathetic gaze. Lowering her eyes, she said:

"What can I give you? I've nothing. My hands are empty. I've lost everything I had. Please forgive me."

Sine bowed her head in shame. She couldn't face Jagdish.

The boat kept moving. When Mamta looked up again, she saw a small boy standing on the wet sand. He was staring at Mamta, as if trying to recognise her. She became nervous.

Then, a little distance away, she heard the cries of a child from the shore. It was a small girl, toddling on the sand, weeping. Mamta, overwhelmed by motherly emotions, thought the ground was too cold and too hard for the child. She felt sorry. Fearing that the girl might fall in the water, she stretched her arms as if to pick up the abandoned child, embrace her and kiss her.

But the shore was distant and the child was far away. The river was wide and the boat was moving fast. Mamta kept looking back at the child. She felt helpless and desperate.

When Mamta looked ahead, she saw several persons on the bank. Her mother, father, brother, and sister, all were kneeling on the ground. Behind them were her other relatives. Their faces, heavily lined with age and worries, were full of shame. They were crying. Mamta turned her face away.

Then, suddenly, she heard cries coming from the shore, cries choked with emotions and soaked in tears. They said: "Mamta forgive us. We are sinners. We are murderers. Please forgive us."

Mamta felt as if her nerves were giving way. She held her forehead with her right hand and heaved a deep sigh. In a low voice, she mumbled: "Only God can forgive you."

The boat was moving at a fast speed. Mamta didn't dare look towards the shores again. There were miles and miles of wilderness. Everything was barren, frozen. There was no sign of life anywhere – no birds, no animals, no human beings. The silence

was frightening.

Suddenly, voices started coming from the shores once again. Was she nearing another habitation? Mamta wondered. Plugging her ears with her fingers, she buried her face in her lap and fell asleep.

— From the novel “*Doctor Dev*”

Hamida

IN the early hours of the morning, while it was still dark, Hamida went out of her home, as was her habit. She took the footpath that led to the fields. She had barely gone a few yards when she noticed the outlines of a human form beside the trunk of a tree. She picked up courage and tiptoed towards the recumbent figure. It was the mad woman. She was as dead as a block of stone, and between her legs was a new-born baby, still attached to its mother by the umbilical cord.

An agonised groan escaped Hamida's throat. She shut her eyes and swayed as if she was going to fall. Cold shivers ran up and down her spine. She mustered up courage and ran back home to fetch her husband.

Rashida came and felt the mad woman's pulse. It was not necessary, for death was clearly stamped on her face. But death had not claimed her child, whose heart beat with all the vigour of the primeval life-force. It was sucking its left thumb. Hamida covered the body with an old sheet she had brought with her.

"In the name of Allah!" muttered Rashida as he severed the cord. Hamida wrapped the baby in her *dupatta*.

The news spread in the village like the morning mist. Women dropped the plates in which they were kneading flour; they left the fires burning in their hearths and hurried to Hamida's house. Hamida had bathed and dressed the baby. It lay in a cot as soft

and fair as a wad of cottonwool. It sucked the end of the cloth which Hamida had soaked in warm milk. Javed watched over his little guest with a sense of ownership.

“May Allah bless you!”

“May Allah fill your home with plenty!”

“May your children live long years!”

“You have earned merit in the eyes of Allah!”

The women came and blessed Hamida. They lauded her act of mercy and went back to their homes. The elders buried the mad woman's corpse.

In the evening Rashida cleansed the glass of the hurricane lantern and lit the wick. The babe blinked its big eyes; it was fascinated by the flame. Hamida peered at the babe. What wretch could have lusted after the charred body of the mad woman – she asked herself. Did she consent to the act or was she raped? Did the man realise what he was perpetrating on a lunatic woman? Did he know what would happen to the seed he had planted in the vagrant's womb? The poor woman was not even aware of the fact that she was going to give birth to a boy. How did she suffer the pains of labour? Did no midwife feel compassion for her? Her shrieks must have been lost in the loneliness of the dark night; she must have wrestled with the gusts of wind and writhed in agony on the cold, hard ground! But nature's laws are immutable. The child ignored its mother's agony and came out into the world. And its mother perished in the final process of giving it birth.

Hamida dozed off to sleep beside the cot. She dreamt of Rashida galloping away with her lying across his saddle; she dreamt of his keeping her in a gardener's hut for three nights and days and then throwing her out; she dreamt of her turning insane and running about the village lanes with a life quickening in her womb... and then giving birth to a child under the shade of a tree. The child was exactly like Javed. It tugged at her breasts and tried to suck with its toothless gums. It howled because there was no milk.

Hamida woke up with a start. Her new baby was yelling with all its might. She picked it up and put it against her bosom. She looked a little apprehensively at Javed, who had just fallen asleep. She glanced towards Rashida, who was sitting beside the hearth in the courtyard. He had not left her, nor thrown her out. She was safely installed in his house. He was a kind husband. He had given her the handsome, curly-headed Javed. And now her family had increased. God had himself sent her another son. Hamida got up, kissed her new son on the forehead.

Javed had her breast for two full years and had not been weaned very long. Hamida had heard that white cummin-seed brought milk to a woman's breasts. She swallowed a palmful with a tumbler of milk. Three days later Hamida's breasts filled with milk. She offered them to the child of the mad woman of Sakkar as if he were her own son.

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As a tiny spark glimmering in a cake of cow-dung spreads its fire to the others heaped over it, gossip about the foundling began to be slowly whispered around the village. "The mad woman was a Hindu. The Muslims have grabbed a Hindu child. Under the very noses of the Hindus, they have converted a Hindu child into a Muslim...."

As a cat takes its kittens from one place to another, Hamida clasped the foundling to her bosom and took him from the front courtyard to the rooms at the back of the house. Even within the seclusion of her walls, she got to know what was being said about the child and its dead mother.

The Hindus called a meeting to discuss the matter. "Are we sure that the mad woman was a Hindu?" asked one. "I have heard it with my own ears. She was the daughter of a rich merchant of Lala-Musa. Her husband's second wife mixed some sort of poison in her food which made her lose her mind," replied another.

"I am told that her people put her in chains and did their best to keep her at home; but it was in her *kismet* to be a tramp," explained one.

"With my own eyes I saw the sacred '*Om*' tattooed on her left arm," said a man, slapping the ground to invest his words with an air of finality.

"Friends, what perfidy is this! We have our eyes wide open and they throw dust into them."

"Shame on us all! We have let them convert a Hindu boy into a Muslim, as if it were the most natural thing in the world."

Some were for forgetting the whole business: "Friends, let it be. We do not know what evil spirit sired the child. Who wants to saddle himself with the son of a bitch?"

"Idiot!" retorted a hothead at the top of his voice. "The issue is between our faith and theirs. If we let this matter go unchallenged today, tomorrow they will want all of us to become Muslims. Don't you see how uppish their behaviour has become?"

The atmosphere in the room was suffocating with hate. "We will take back the boy; we'll see who will dare to stay our hand."

"It won't be much trouble bringing him up. We can raise a subscription and pay the water-carrier's woman to look after him."

"Surely we can't be such a useless lot as not to be able to afford the upbringing of one little boy!"

"There is no knowing that the boy will not turn out to be a deaf mute or a lunatic like his mother; or he may take after...."

"Why should that matter? When he grows up he can sweep the temple floor. All he'll want is two square meals a day. Surely we can provide that!"

They applauded each other's courage. There was much back-slapping and braggadocio.

"The water-carrier's wife may have her own views on the subject. We had better find out from her before we do anything."

"She wouldn't dare to refuse us. We'll cross her palm with silver and then broach the subject."

"We are counting our chickens before they are hatched.... Let the boy grow up a little... or will they be circumcising him?"

"Are you wanting to back out now? If you cannot do even this

little bit for your faith, then go and drown yourselves in the sea!"
"If someone as much as diverts water from your fields to his
own before his time, you think nothing of splitting open his
skull. But when it comes to being robbed of your sons, your
mouths are covered with mildew."

Once again the atmosphere was charged with hate, as thick as the smoke of a coal-fire.

Thereafter, the Hindus began to give Rashida black looks whenever they passed him in the village. Rashida pretended to ignore them, but he warned his wife and mildly suggested that it was not worth their while to make an issue of the subject. Every time Rashida brought up the matter, Hamida's heart would sink. She had nurtured the tiny bundle of skin and bone with her own breasts for six months, till he too had started to look upon as fat and chubby as her own Javed. He had come to look upon Hamida as his mother; his eyes followed her as she moved about the house. He stretched his arms out for Rashida as any child would towards its father. Why has the Hindus not thought of taking the babe on the first day? Why had they let her spend six months of sleepless nights? Why had they let her swallow palmfuls of cummin-seed and turn the blood in her veins to milk in her breasts? Why had they made her wash the child's soiled garments till her hands had become hard and calloused? Why? Why? Why?

One day the Hindu elders of the village sent for Rashida.

The saliva dried up in Hamida's mouth. Would they be nasty to Rashida? Would they insult him? She had brought it on her husband's head. She pleaded with Rashida to take her with him. She would give them all the answers. She would plead with them for the boy. But Rashida would not have any of this and went alone to the house where they had summoned him.

A group of Hindu elders lay sprawling on *charpoys* laid out in a courtyard; they were expecting Rashida and his Muslim friends. Rashida came alone and in a matter-of-fact tone enquired after their health. An uneasy silence followed.

"Well, what do you intend doing? Are you or are you not

going to return the boy to us?" asked one very gravely as he passed the pipe of the hookah to his neighbour.

"What right have I to give away or keep a life? That only Allah, whose gift it is, can decide," replied Rashida, touching his forehead and looking up at the sky.

"This is honeyed talk; get down to realities!" snapped one angrily.

"Allah out of His infinite mercy picked on me to save the life of the child; if it had been a couple of hours later, the boy might have been devoured by a tom-cat or a pie-dog. Allah had decreed a longer life for him...."

"True! if God decrees a longer span of life, no earthly power can cut it short. But you are no doubt aware that his mother was a Hindu woman. We cannot tolerate the taking away of a Hindu child."

"Good friends, I did not know who she was, Hindu or what. She ate the food from Hindu homes as well as from Muslim...."

"She was insane. You are not out of your mind, are you?" snapped one.

"If you had taken over the child on the very first day and brought him up, I would not have said a word. When we picked him up he was a handful of bones. My wife has nourished him with infinite care for six months and saved his life. And now you are suddenly concerned about his future. Friends, beware of the wrath of Allah! It is for Him to decree who will bring up the child, you or I. Do you think I will get out of it?" There was a tone of sincerity in Rashida's voice. Some of the Hindus were for leaving Rashida with the halter he had put round his own neck.

"We don't want his business to get out of hand," said one of the Hindu gently. "The child is not related either to you or to any of us. This is however a matter of religion and one should not stand in its way. Why put your life in jeopardy? If somebody takes it into his head to do you harm, don't say we did not warn you! You should realise what is best for you and give us the child of your own free will. If you want to be reimbursed for the expense you have incurred, we will pay you."

"Indeed... most certainly," chorused the others.

"Allah, have mercy on me!" exclaimed Rashida, holding both his ears with his hands.

"We have the water-carrier's woman here. Some of us will accompany you to your house and bring away the child. We will purify him and re-convert him to Hinduism."

"For the last time, I beg of you," pleaded Rashida, with the palms of his hands joined as if in prayer, "have compassion for the child and let him stay where he is. My wife is looking after him as if she had borne him in her womb."

"We have been straight with you and pointed out the right course for you to take. If you know your interests, then act like a wise man and come along with us – or take the consequences. We too know that *ghee* only sticks to the crooked finger."

The Hindu elders stood up to indicate that the argument was at an end. The water-carrier's woman emerged, her head covered with her *dupatta*. There was no way out. Rashida got up and took the party to his house.

Hamida stood on the threshold, with her eyes fixed on the lane. She saw Rashida's dejected look and the people with him. Her heart sank. It reminded her of the day when she had been snatched away from her mother, separated from her father and estranged from her own brothers and sisters. The foundling had become a part of her own flesh and blood. Hamida ran indoors, picked up the child and clasped him to her bosom.

Rashida entered his courtyard like one who had lost his way. He did not have to say a word. Nor did Hamida ask him for an explanation. The water-carrier's woman hesitated to take the child from Hamida's clasp

"Hurry up! It's getting late," ordered one of the Hindus in a harsh tone. "We have other things to do."

The water-carrier's wife took the foundling from Hamida's arms. The boy's hands clutched Hamida's *dupatta* and pulled it off her head. The water-carrier's wife forced open the child's hand to release the *dupatta*. The child felt the rough touch of unfamiliar hands and began to cry.

Hamida sank to the ground. She heard the boy's crying recede further and further down the lane. Milk continued to ooze from her breasts and wet her shirt.

That night no food was cooked in Rashida's home. Javed asked his father, "Abba, where have they taken my little brother? Abba, when will my brother come home?" Rashida looked at his son and hung his head.

Hamida thought of Kammo and then of the foundling. Why did she have to pick up flowers which others had plucked and cast aside? What inner compulsion made her water withered buds and try to revive them? And yet they remained estranged from her and left in her solitude! The only one who stayed by her was Rashida. He was her man, the father of her son.

The next day passed. And the following day. On the fourth day, the villagers could talk of nothing but the fate of the foundling. Everyone was saying: "The boy is on the brink of death; he throws up every drop of milk that goes down his throat."

— From the novel *"The Skeleton"*

That Man

WOMAN is the world's greatest smuggler. A man might smuggle out opium and marijuana. Or at best gold. Or the secrets of a government. That's all. Nothing further. But a woman can smuggle a man's complete existence. So long as she can, she smuggles and conceals it deep down in her womb. When she cannot, she confesses she cannot and shows she cannot. And that too not out of a sense of shame. With intense pride. Why, she may archly consider the art of smuggling to be her profession. Not as a mere right. She is after all obliged to perpetuate the human race,

So, to oblige my father, my mother asked God to grant her a son. At first she went to the local medicos, then to faqirs for herbal remedies; then to the women around for voodoo and taboo; even to the graves of saints who still had the power to perform miracles; thereon to the temple dedicated to Shiva – the Lord of Procreation. So frantic was she in fact that she drove God to desperation until He granted her the wish.

And taking Him to be really miserly, she had her own way of going to the extent of striking a bargain even with Him. Should He give her a son, she would offer the fruit of her womb at the altar of the same temple; to serve Him and His great cause.

A strange bargain. So God had to be under an obligation to her. "See what I am offering to serve You. People bring a handful of flour; or offer molasses, rice and coconuts; or at the utmost dedicate a slab of marble at the threshold of or on the temple-

wall; or a gold-plated leaf in the pagoda. But see, I have offered a live boy to render such service as You will have him to!"

And on the other hand, she put my father too under another sort of obligation to her. "See, what ordeals I had to pass through. But finally I managed to perpetuate your name, I did not allow your seed to die out. And even if this son of yours will not till your soil, and will not be a prop to you in your old age, you will still have the pleasure of feasting your eyes on him and find in him some solace. Worldly sons can only be seen, but people will travel distances to pay their homage to a child offering."

So mother often comes to pay her homage; father comes only on a full-moon night or on a feast-day. Perhaps for the simple reason that mother had to go through so much and to reckon with a happening of such significance. Here I am then – at twenty, a manifestation of that long struggle of hers.

I do not remember it all. Forty days after my birth when she wrapped me in a saffron cloth and presented me as her offering, I wonder whether I cried at the touch of Lord Shiva's cold feet beneath my tender body. I have it that mother did enrobe me in saffron from the very first.

The Chief Priest of the temple, Mahant Kirpa Sagar, touched my forehead with the feet of the idol and put me again into her lap. "This child is henceforth Shiva's son. Parvati is his mother and you simply his wet-nurse. For one year you are to render this service as wet-nurse. When the year is over, you are bidden to return him to us."

So for one year I was given as a debt. I do not know whether I learnt to call mother by any name during this one year or not. Perhaps I did not since my lips do not seem to be familiar with any name for her.

I imagine I must have crawled on my first birthday in my saffron wraps to the flowers at the feet of the idol in the temple and picked up one and put it in my mouth. Not accepting the taste, I must as certainly have cried. The old serving-man of the temple, Sai Mangat Ram, tells me that petals of the flowers had stuck to my palate when I was found lying gasping for breath. He pincer-ed the petals out of my mouth with his fingers, and then to pacify

me, Mahant had with his own hands put some milk in a vessel, added some sugar to it and made me partake of the offering at the idol.

Perhaps I looked for days with the eye of wonder at the faces of people around: at Sai Mangat Ram's, at Gobind Sadhu's, at Mahant Kirpa Sagar's, at Shiva's and Parvati's, and at the faces of devotees visiting the temple each day. I remember nothing. Only all the faces seem familiar from the very beginning of my life.

There is a cave in the temple. They say the mouth of the passage to this is in Kangra valley, and that it stretches right up to the peak of Mount Kailash. But no one has ever travelled all the way through this maze of a cave. Or if ever anyone did it must have been ages ago. It runs into hundreds of miles. But this is mere hearsay. One sees only this end of this story: beginning at the mouth-end of the cave; no one knows anything about the other end. I know I will never know either, but it seems as if I travel part of this interminable way, some few miles every day. I do not seem to arrive anywhere. I simply go on and on. It is dark at its rounded mouth; the dark deepens as you go deep inside.

The word 'Mother' I have recourse to, mind you, only to tell my tale; I have no relationship with it. Hundreds of women come to the temple, she too is one. Sentimental attachment I could have had only with 'that woman'. And yet I would refer to her as 'that woman', not as 'Mother'. The word seems to me a cruel joke – in it's relationship to me for certain, perhaps equally to her. Her's is exactly the case of poor Parvati.

So often at night I wander away from that part of the temple where we sleep to the place where the life-size statues of Shiva and Parvati are. To me they both appear to be the forms of an aged peasant and a middle-aged woman wrapt in fervent prayer – for the gift of a son – exactly as once my father and mother must have fervently prayed to God for granting them their boon.

I stand in front of the two temple statues and smilingly ask: "Do you want a son? You do, do you? Right then, I offer myself in charity to you...."

— *From the novel "That Man"*

Sanjay

ABOUT three years ago, in order to tide over a lean period, Sanjay had undertaken the translation of Government speeches. His fingers would start aching after writing a few pages. He had a similar experience today. He had hardly finished ten pages when the fingers of this right hand became stiff, making it difficult for him to continue.

He had never had this trouble while writing a story or working on his novel. He could write as many as twenty pages at a stretch. His pen had never betrayed him.

Once he had translated some outstanding stories of the world. Even then his fingers had not ached and he had gone on and on.

But today, while translating, he had the uncomfortable feeling of the midnoon sun appearing at midnight. Why did his fingers ache while translating Government speeches?

Every speech gave him the feeling as if he was trading in words. It bought and sold man's mind — not only his mind but also his body and his past and future.

Putting aside this trading in words, Sanjay started jotting down some points for his new story, which like a cloud had been hovering in his mind for many days.

He did not know when the paper slipped from his hand and fell under the table. He bent down and picked up the sheet of paper. It was blank.

He again looked under the table, presuming it was not the same sheet of paper on which he had jotted down the points for his story. But there was no other sheet of paper under the table. He wondered what had happened to the notes he had scribbled on the paper. He lifted the lamp and held it under to look again.

A shiver ran through his body. To his utter amazement, all the letters which had formed the words were lying on the floor, clearly visible to him. He could pick them up, one by one.

Stretching his hand under the table, he started picking up the letters, one by one. They were small and round like black seeds. Placing the letters on the palm of his left hand he felt them with a finger of his right hand. Lo! His palm had become soft and sticky.

He pressed the finger hard on his palm. His palm was really soft and sticky like clay. All the letters had got embedded in the flesh of the palm.

Alarmed, he dug his left thumb into his right palm. It had also become moist and soft.

He transferred the letters from his left palm to the right palm and pressed it with his left thumb. The letters sank into his right palm.

His palms were smelling of moist earth. He raised his hands and held them under the eyes. Both his hands were made of clay.

The letters had disappeared. His hands were empty. A fear gripped his mind. How would he write without his hands?

In his body there was the movement of a living being. He could think and see. In a flurry of bewilderment he sat down on the divan and got up immediately. His feet, legs, arms and head – they were quite normal. But his hands?

He feared that if he moved his hands they would disintegrate from his body like the earth.

For a long time he stood there, his mind in a whirl of chaos. Then he jerked one arm to see if his hand would remain intact or fall off. The hand remained firmly joined to his arm. He jerked his other arm. It remained joined to his wrist.

Astounded, he again looked at his hands. There were tiny

flowers growing on his hands. He couldn't believe his eyes. He blinked them and looked again. Yes, there were tiny flowers growing on his hand. Red and very soft to the touch. His entire palms covered with them. Besides the smell of moist earth, he could also smell the fragrance of the flowers.

The fragrance swept over his mind and he closed his eyes in a strange surge of ecstasy.

Sanjay seemed to have lost count of time but the sun did not. When it entered through Sanjay's window in the morning and spread itself into his room, Sanjay slid out of his sleep and found himself lying on the divan, face down.

He got up hastily. They were the small walls, the same writing table in a corner of his room. The night lamp was still burning on the table.

He quickly looked at his hands. Thank God, like other parts of his body, they were made of flesh, not clay.

The sheet of paper was still lying on the table, covered with the jottings of his story.

— From the novel "*The Thirteenth Sun*"

Sanjay and Shirin

THE next day went past, so did the day after. Since Karim had not paid an overdue visit, Sanjay decided to call on him. On turning into the street, he could not but notice Fatch on his doorstep frantically waving out to him.

Directly the young man stepped in, the elder shut the door. "I've got tired of waiting.... Yesterday too I waited – For over two hours you did not turn up at all."

"I hope all's well. Karim okay?" He searched Fatch's face as if fear-stricken.

Fatch sat on his cot and pulled Sanjay down beside him. "Nothing's wrong with him physically; it's things around; he's terribly upset...."

That was astounding news. Had something really gone wrong he would have got in touch with him fast enough. He could have sent Salamat with a message.

"I advised him to talk the matter over with you.... Do you think he would listen? Breaking my head against a wall, I was...."

"What's happened?" Sanjay looked too careworn for his years.

"How can I tell you?... If he hasn't the heart to tell you himself, how can I, I ask you? .. Since yesterday he hasn't got up.... Covered himself from hand to foot with a sheet, he has – And not moved since!"

Sanjay fired a shot in the dark. It hit the target! "Has it some-

thing to do with the Hindu-Muslim question?"

"What else, Mian! That's the trouble with folks low-down! Rich people way up don't bother. They mix freely. No one cares. No one says anything...."

"Is that all?" Sanjay got up, immensely relieved. "Why did he not come and speak to me about it? What's there to work? All you have to have, is the will. Work can be done anywhere. If not there – somewhere else – down town."

Fateh pulled Sanjay down by the arm again and sat him by his side. "There's much more to it, my young man. The elders around are pressing Shirin's neck into the marriage-noose. She's craned it away – beyond their reach. That's what's made them arch their backs harder...."

"How does the communal question feature in?"

"There must be something deeper ... How could I know? Since yesterday, Barkatay and Nembatay too have been after the poor girl... and she's been weeping her heart and eyes sore...."

Sanjay rose up again. "I'll go size things up for myself... Let me see...."

Fateh held on to him. "Look – how are you coming to ask anything and how's he going to answer you with everybody around. Sit down. I'll send for him. We can talk things over in quiet."

After a minute or two of indecision, Sanjay gave in. "Okay... I'll be waiting for him on the other side of the machine room.... Tell him to come right away."

The moment Fateh's back was turned for Karim's, Sanjay did an about-turn in double-quick time to the ruins. ..

Karim did not take long in keeping up the appointment. Seeing his long face and lifeless body, Sanjay took him by the arm. "So it boils down to this, doesn't it? – You didn't think much of your friend in this hour of your trial – You didn't care to contact him even...."

"I feel thoroughly ashamed of myself. I should have lost no time...." Karim selected a rock to sit on. "It's all so stupid...so utterly absurd... Had I the means, I honestly would turn my back

on them forever by moving out – bag and baggage.”

Sanjay took the cue farther. “If you want me to speak the truth, Mian, one would fly off the world to spaces above and beyond. Only tell me of one good place where they who live life, allow others to live theirs....”

“Never was a truer word side, my friend. There are hordes of bastards banded up everywhere.”

“While the most brilliant brains are being exiled every day.... But let’s not go off at a tangent.... Let’s come to our specific problem.”

“The problem’s the same. It was always there; it will continue to be there...I wish I could wander from street to street, from height to height.... Like him. The bandit’s within my warp, O Ramdas! O Fateh Mohammed! Where are the immortal voices of our poet-prophets?”

Sanjay put an understanding hand on Karim’s shoulder. “How does the noble friendship between the Hindu, Ramdas and the Muslim, Fateh Mohammed affect their tribes? We won’t meet each other here.... There are other places....”

“It’s not that – “Karim could not but sink in abject despair, again into a deep-things-session.

“Then, for mercy’s sake, tell me, – what is it?... uncle Fateh alluded to something more....”

Karim’s head fell – chin touching chest. “That’s a problem even more stupendous....”

Sanjay sought to pull his friend out of the depths making him so very despondent. “Fine then – if problems are that vastly grave, lets all go into voluntary exile....”

Karim rallied all the strength he could in his present broken-down state. “Our Shirin’s harping still, on the machine-string while those living in towering-tops-with-balconies have their hawks’-eyes on her.... With their talons they’ll tear an unmarried girl to death....”

Sanjay now sank into his think-tank. When he scrambled out, it was with an earnest endeavour to pull through the present impasse. “Karim Mian! will you allow me to have a few words with

Shirin?"

"Most willingly.... Whenever you wish.... I'll go myself to fetch her.... What's going to be the out come of all our talk if she doesn't come out with what's on her heart and mind?"

"She will... I'm sure...."

"She won't... I should know her better.... She'll sit with her lips sealed tight...."

Sanjay helped Karim on to his feet. "You may be perfectly right.... Only give me one good chance to test my powers...."

"O Lord!" Karim permitted the help proffered, and was about to be on his way, when Sanjay held him back a moment. "Just one promise first, my Friend! Don't you break off with me, should I say something you don't particularly like...."

In silence, Karim offered his hand. That clasp was more circling than a torrent of words.

On his leaving, Sanjay rested the palms of his hands on the dilapidated walls and shut his eyes as if in deep concentration. So he attuned his ears to the ancient voices settled there from when the habitat first had bustled with life.... Then he rippled his fingers over the centuries' old crumbling stone-and-dust of the well, softly touched his forehead, and bowed his head in salutation to the age of the earth from which the stone must have been hewn.

Twilight had deepened into the darkness of night when father and daughter appeared. So dark in fact, had it grown that it took them time to detach Sanjay's form from the rest of the scene. And a gentle tremor shook Shirin when she approached him. Complainingly she looked at her father for not briefing her on the clear aim of a visit on so God-forsaken an area as this. "Abba! You said this place was dangerous...." She pointed out as for Sanjay alone.

"For whom?... Me?"

"Not when we are around.... Not when I am standing by...." Karim answered both of them as he cautiously tried to find footing on a spot a little away from them.

"You don't have to be so discreet, my Friend! What I'd like to

ask could as well be asked in your presence....” Despite Sanjay’s uninhibited candour, Karim preferred to be where he had already found a slab to sit on.

Shirin too meanwhile had made herself as comfortable as she could, considering everything, when Sanjay echoes their fears for him. “Is this place really as dangerous as you make it out to be?”

Shirin thought he had missed the gist of things both said and unsaid. “Not for everyone.” She accentuated her words distinctly. “On religious counts....”

“So religion alone is in danger, is it?” Sanjay twisted the entire trend of their argument in a serio-comic manner. Even Karim felt pretty tickled on hearing this and mightily pleased on more to come. “Then, just as instead of one, two undertake a pilgrimage together, so both religions should move on together as well to be safely out of harm’s way....”

Shirin raised her eyes – beaming with a radiance from an idea more immense and intense in implication than any she had ever known originating. Sanjay perched himself atop a high stone opposite her. “So then... are you still hell-bent?... Are you really intent on baking raw words?”

“I am!” Shirin was as resolute as ever.

“But I can’t guarantee you a press....”

Shirin’s silence that followed seemed impregnated with the vaguer question: ‘Then what are we talking about?’

“There are lots of other words in life that need to be baked in different fires....” And fixedly staring into her eyes, he meant to get these across. “Religion, marriage and relationships are all ingredients for baking these raw words....”

Shirin’s eyes grew moist. She looked down on the ground. “Perhaps... but some are doomed by Fate to be dealt raw words....”

The tone of her voice was penetrating. “Why?... Why must you say that?” He took her hands in his. “Can’t you accept me?”

She bent her head – so low that it nearly touched his hands. She sat tongue-tied.

“You can’t?” He patted her hands. Trembling, she grasped

his, and raising her head to look through him, spoke the little she could. "Some words are dumb...." He pressed her fingers with his lips and called out. "Karim Mian! We'll have to bow in salutation again to your dumb daughter!"

He was about to release her hands in the intended act of getting up, but she held on. The session was not quite over. "Can you really drink water tomorrow from the cup you drank yesterday?"

In reply, he gently pressed her to his side. Seeing, on rising, that Karim still sat on, he as gently kissed her. "I knew all along that from your hands alone could I drink the Waters of Immortality!"

Turning, he called out "Karim Mian!" Time had ripened for his friend to join them. "Didn't you say that real writers were prophets in their own ways?... Never was a truer word said.... The end of the novel's turned out to be true!"

Karim wiped the tears of joy from his eyes. "And I'd thought our tiny Taji had Mumtaz's soul in her! ... How wrong had I been not to have seen it in Shirin...."

"Didn't I say I was only my father's daughter?" Shirin pressed her head against Karim's.

"Where did you say does your novel end?"

"On Resurrection and Salvation.... When the tormented are filled again with flesh and blood.... On the forty-ninth day, to be precise."

Shirin recaptured the whole novel in her mind. "The one on Creation and Re-creation, isn't it?"

But Sanjay had yet not finished off with Karim. "All's on this Good Earth: Heaven and Hell.... So often does man who is born here, die here; so often does he who dies here, get reborn here itself.... Your daughter's given me the breath of life all over again today...."

Karim affectionately embraced Sanjay. "I said from the very beginning that you were both friend and son to me.... But not in my wildest dreams, believe me, had I figured out this relationship...." And his eyes got blurred again with tears. "What you said about Shirin so fits her, – that I'd ask you to call her by that

very name and make her a Hindu....”

Sanjay planted the palm of his hand firmly on Karim’s lips. “That cannot be.... Neither I – nor Shirin’s ever going to talk of conversion.... Hadn’t I just said that just as two setting out on a pilgrimage together for safety, so must religions go on side by side? – So ever to be out of harm’s way....”

“Is it possible?” Shirin wondered.

“Herein lies the beauty of our Hell!” Sanjay beamed a smile.

With Shirin on his left and Sanjay on his right, Karim picked his steps gingerly from the rubble of the ruins as he felt a lump rising in his throat.

“Watch out!” Shirin cautioned the men, “That’s our entire neighbourhood. They’ve come out en masse for parley or for open war...?”

“That’s the boon-cum-curse web of the forty-ninth day!” Sanjay philosophised.... With re-birth on the earth, the struggle begins anew!... But let’s not lose sight of our goals.... We’ve to install our machine.... We’ve to face the situation of our novel banned.... Yet let’s not forget: These are routine clouds skimming across sunny skies, over shimmering waters and undulating lands....”

— From the novel “*49 Days*”

A Woman Called Sara

AMONG the Australian tribes, there is a popular tale, handed down from generation to generation. Long long ago, the wings of the Australian ducks used to be white. Once there came an unprecedented storm and the ducks, in panic, took shelter in the nests that belonged to the vultures. After the storm subsided, the giant vultures returned to their nests and, finding ducks there, attacked and bit them till they were nearly dead. They plucked the white wings of the ducks. Then, they picked up those poor miserable birds in their claws and cast them away in a distant forest.

After some time, when the ducks regained their consciousness, they found to their utter dismay that they had no more any wings on their bodies. With unbearable pain, they started rolling on the ground. At that moment, there came some crows and, listening to the woeful story of the ducks, they said, 'Those huge, terrible vultures are our enemies, too. We will take revenge on them. We will keep the ducks alive at all costs'. So determined, the crows pulled out their own black wings and gave them to the ducks. Since then, the wings of the Australian ducks are black.

As I was reading a poem which Sara had sent to me, I recalled the crows of the tale of the Australian tribes comforting the ducks and offering them their own black wings. The poem was:

You were a poet...

Me, a prostitute, was married in a dingy room

and my son died without a shroud...

Being a prostitute, I could not earn you
because you, a base coin, slipped away from my breasts
And lost the wedding procession...

For four years I went on weaving half a cot
And you kept sleeping in my shame-hut.

Oh, what a base coin are you that circulate in my shame-hut,
the kind I can earn anywhere.

You mate with a shroud

And I am a prostitute born to a human being...

Dancing in ecstasy I lost my anklet

And you were lost in your silence

I was a virgin prostitute

and not an object of your pleasure.

you bastards, you are the limit

For you, a woman is a means to your sex-release.

Now I know I was merely your kept woman

And all your words were pimps.

I have never demanded any wedding-money from you

I am such an affluent prostitute

that people give me wedding-money for the asking...

Your fatigue, this city knows well

Your hands have become pamphlets.

Your sword and your might

Where were they when, on the witness of four eunuchs,
you made me your respectability.

Your sense of shame does not accept a dead child

How the hell can it accept my shattered self?

My last man, the one to whom I was married till today, is dead

Now my bangles have turned into spears

and with them I will write my story.

And Sara actually wrote that story and sent it to me in the form of a letter:

Amrita! very often I bother you, but to whom else can I go! I have never told you how I started writing poetry...

Five years ago, a poet, so to say, was working with me in the Family Planning Department. I was extremely religious. Even the road from home to the office, I could remember only with difficulty. I had no interest in reading or writing. But this much I knew, poets were great people.

One day, the Poet Saheb said, "I have an important matter to discuss with you." We met in a restaurant. He asked me if I would marry him.

In our next meeting, the marriage was settled.

We did not have enough money to pay the Qazi his fee for solemnizing the wedding. I said, "Half the money you raise on loan and the other half I will. And as my family will not participate in the marriage, you will have to arrange for witnesses for me also."

I borrowed a dress from a friend and reached the place we had agreed to meet, and we got married. The Qazi Saheb demanded a box of sweets in addition to his fee and we were left with only six rupees. By the time we reached our hut, there remained only two.

I was sitting in the light of a lantern with my face covered with a veil. The poet said, "Have you two rupees? My friends are sitting outside. They have no money for the fare to go back." I handed over the last two rupees to him.

Afterwards, he said that, in his family, a wife did not work. So I lost my job, too.

Poets and critics in the making used to come home and talk, as if each was on Eliot.

I did have a mad love for intellect, but that did not quench my hunger. Every day we cooked philosophy on our kitchen-fire and lived on words.

A day came when we were turned out of our hut, too. After all, it belonged to some one else. We took half a portion of a small house on rent. I used to lie down on a mat gazing blankly at the walls and becoming a victim of my own foolishness.

Then came the seventh month of my pregnancy. I started having severe pains. Lost in his own intellectual maze, my poet-husband went out of the house without even glancing at me. When the pains became unbearable, the landlady who heard my cries came to see me. She took me to a hospital. At that time, I had intense pain in my body and five crisp rupee-notes in my pocket.

A son was born after some time... It was a terribly cold day and I did not even have a piece of cloth to cover the newborn child.

The doctor placed the child beside me on my bed.

The child opened its eyes for a bare five minutes and left me for ever in search of his shroud.

Since then my whole body is filled with those eyes.

The sister at the hospital helped me to lie down in the ward. I told her that I wanted to go home as nobody had any knowledge of my condition. She looked straight at me and said, "There is a danger of your getting septic. Please lie down in your bed."

But now there was no chance of getting any rest anywhere. I had a dead child and a sum of five rupees on hand. I told the sister, 'I have no money to pay the hospital fee. I am going home to bring the money. I am leaving my dead child with you as security. I am going to get money. I will not run away

without paying the bill.”

I got down the stairs. I was running a temperature of 105°. I boarded a bus and reached home. Milk was flowing down from my breasts. I collected that milk in a glass and kept it in a corner.

Meanwhile, my poet-husband and his friends arrived. I informed him that a son had been born and he had died...

He received the news in a casual way and told his fellow-poets and critics about it. There was silence in the room for two minutes, but the third minute, their conversation commenced again:

What do you think of Freud?

—What does Rimbaud say about it?

—And Sadi?

—Waris Shah was a very great man...

I had heard enough to all these before, but now their words were strikingly different. I felt as if all these great men had got stuck in my blood and Rimbaud and Freud were snatching away my child from my womb.

Would you believe it, Amrita! That was the day when intellect started laughing diabolically in my blood, and real wisdom had stepped into my home for the first time. See what a role my son's birth had played! Their talks continued for about an hour and all the time a strange deathly silence kept staring at me. After swimming in the culverts of their own intellect, these people flowed out of the room.

Like a wild cry, I descended the stairs...

Now I had only three rupees on hand.

I went to a friend and requested her to loan me three hundred rupees, which she gave. Then she looked closely at me and asked, “Are you ill?”

"I am having slight fever. I cannot stay here long, for I have to go and repay this money to a creditor. He must be waiting for me."

I reached the hospital. The bill was for two hundred and ninety-five rupees. Now again I was left with five rupees and a dead child.

I requested the doctor to raise some money by contribution to provide a shroud of my child, and as for his grave, it could be anywhere.

The real grave of the child was already there in the depths of my heart.

I descended the stairs again with a wild cry on my lips. I ran barefoot on the road and boarded a bus. The doctor was under the impression that I had lost my mental balance on account of the shock.

Seeing blood-stains on my clothes, the conductor of the bus did not insist that I buy a ticket.

I got off the bus, handed over the entire balance of five rupees of the conductor and walked away.

Home! Home! I reached home...

The glass with my breast-milk was there all right, a milk whiter than the shroud...

I swore by my own milk, "I will write poetry! I will compose poems!! I will be known as a poet."

Even before the milk could become stale, I had written my first poem.

But my third desire proved a lie: No one should call me a poet. Perhaps, I may be able to provide a shroud to my child.

Amrita! These days I hear loud shouts from all sides, calling me a 'poet', but so far I have not been able to earn enough

money for the shroud.

Even after all this, I continued sleeping on the burnt-out flames and he used to take me as something tasteless. I never told him that from his room, from my body, a soul had fled for ever...

I kept more silent than even God...

Whenever he slept with me, I felt as if another child of mine was about to die without a shroud...

Only God knows how long the tale of the vultures, ducks and crows will go on and since when this has become true for human beings...

I am sure of one thing: The soul of Sara was as beautiful as the white wings of the ducks. And her white wings were pulled out and what she got in return was the black wings of black abuses

— From the biography of "*Sara Shagufta*"

Mar' -

Sad and Happy Experience

IT was December 1983 when I visited Shantiniketan for the first time – to receive an honorary degree of D.Lit

Before I had left for Shantiniketan, I could not predict the strangely sad and happy experiences that I was to pass through in the absence of Tagore himself.

I had heard he had built a big traditionally laid-out house. But having tired of it, he built another, a small house of his liking. Weary of this one too, he moved into a mud house whose walls were painted with motifs. He built another house where the morning sun flooded the inside with its warmth. And lastly a fifth house, all built close to each other. He named them Udayan, Konark, Shyamali, Punascha and Udichi.

When I felt the walls of these houses with my fingers, it seemed as if all the five elements had combined in the body of Rabindranath Tagore. I saw the ‘Saptarni’ growing in many places. The bunches of seven leaves that grew on the plants felt like the seven layers of super consciousness, the seven-fold truth consciousness.

And when I touched the seven-leafed bunches, I remembered the day when I once had met Rabindranath Tagore. It was 50

years ago, in Lahore, I was just 14 or 15, when my father took me to a bungalow on the outskirts on the city where, it was said, Tagore was staying.

I had just started writing short poems. I was awe-struck at the thought of meeting a poet of such stature, so I just folded my hands to greet him and then went to sit to the left of his chair.

At that moment my father stepped forward and said: "My daughter writes poems. Please give her your blessings". Rabin-drath stretched out his hand, beckoned me to come closer and asked me to recite a poem. I knew no words of mine would reach him, for I wrote in Punjabi. But I could not refuse his wish, so I recited a poem. It was a simple poem. I still remember one of its lines:

You'll find a precious pearl.

Go on... opening the shells.

Silently I hoped he would understand the essence of what I was saying. There were a few people around Tagore and one kind soul translated my poem into English. And the way he placed his hand on my head and smiled so tenderly, I just could not but stare at his glowing face.

The next day, *The Tribune* reported how Tagore had blessed a young budding poetess.

I never imagined that this news would be a prophecy. But when in 1983 this incident came to my mind, I felt that it had filled my imagination and the same time left a vacuum too.

I felt also that if I hadn't been given a degree by Vishwa Bharati, I wouldn't have come to Shantiniketan and would not have become aware of the secret of the sadness and the happiness that I got from life by meeting him in my formative years.

In the coming years, why did I have sad experiences while meeting established poets of my language? I am sure the secret lay hidden in my first meeting with a real poet. I realised this in 1983 – that it had left the impression of the face of a poet inside whom a *rishi* had been awakened. And for me that image became an interpretation of a poet.

The poem of my early years that had I recited to Rabindranath and which I never thought was good enough had a secret hidden in one of the lines: that by opening shell after shell I got a precious pearl in the form of enlightenment – that one becomes a real poet and writes when a *rishi* awakens with oneself.

It was in 1983 that I was standing under the “chhatim” tree. Putting a tilak on my forehead, I was given a coconut, a silk shawl and the degree. And I saw time fly back 50 years. Rabindranath Tagore was there before me and, as my father had wanted, Rabindranath Tagore was giving me his blessings.

A Scholar – A Lover

THERE are some trees in our land which are blessed. When people go to these trees for the fulfilment of their wishes, they tie a strip of cloth on the branches. And the branches, like the hands of some saint, extend toward the people as if to bless them.

If a man can be compared with such a tree, then I can say that such a man was Prof Teja Singh, a scholar from Punjab. When I first met him I found that aura of the trees emanating from him.

The strange thing was that I had never seen him, nor had I asked him for the fulfilment of any of wish. I had only heard his name.

One day while leafing through *PEN* I suddenly came across his comments about my works, I realised that a branch of a kind tree had stretched out to give me recognition.

This incident took place many years ago before Partition, when one of my poems had been published—

*A piece of moon, a fistfull of stars,
have occupied the whole sky.*

Referring to this poem, Teja Singhji had said: “This chit of a girl is occupying the whole sky of our literature”.

I had heard that the critic breed was a hard one to please. They were compared to what Farhad says: “O Shireen! the people of your city are very cruel”. And how was it that this Punjabi critic

was not from Shirceen's cruel city? And then that benevolent tree sent a message to me, saying that if I ever came to Amritsar, I must meet him.

Our first meeting occurred on the bridge of Shri Harmandir Sahib, the Golden Temple. It was late evening. The reflection of the temple lights sparkled in the water of the sarovar. Sitting cross-legged on the bridge, Prof. Teja Singh was not looking at the phosphorescent sarovar, perhaps because the lights were reflections. He was looking at the "origins" in the sky, where there was complete darkness. Perhaps he was looking beyond the emptiness to the light that only the saints see. Suddenly, pointing towards the sky he whispered: "Amrita bibi, I can see you flying up there, a white bird". There was ecstasy in his voice, his manner mysterious. I couldn't make out whether I was sitting with a mystic fakir or someone else.

It was a brief encounter which, like the white bird in the sky and the reflections of the lights in the sarovar, lingered long in my memory. Many years passed without meeting him. But when Panjab University banned one of my poems *Anndutta* from a prescribed book, I received a kind letter from him. He once again wrote when the yellow journalism of Panjab created a turmoil in my life. "Amrita dear, don't feel depressed at the wayward ways of the world. You are forever. If the times cannot understand your poetic creativity it doesn't matter. Still there are many who appreciate your new approach to art. May the beautiful Almighty keep you in high spirits". This letter is dated March 23, 1950.

Sunehure had won the Sahitya Akademi Award. But when none of my books was approved as a textbook in the Panjab University, then, talking about *Sunehure*, Teja Singh wrote: "Till the time that Iqbal the poet was alive, Panjab University never prescribed his book, but after his death they sang praises of him to high heaven. Like this, till the writer of such a 'book of Messages' is alive, the authorities of Panjab University are not ready to listen to her messages". This letter came on February 14, 1956.

It is said that beneath the trees that are blessed by God, in their shadows, many rishis have passed years in meditation. This must

be the truth, for later I came to know that Teja Singhji had spent many years in the agony of love. And the state of his mind had become like that tree whose leaves grow to fulfil the wishes of the people.

I heard that Teja Singhji, while teaching poetry in the class, would burst into tears.

He had compiled an English-Punjabi dictionary. And I felt that perhaps he was the kind of scholar who could never find the meaning of his agony in any word of his dictionary. And then I came to know he had had a severe attack of paralysis.

When the Sahitya Akademi was first established in Delhi, Teja Singhji and I were included on the advisory board. In one of the board's meetings at my Patel Nagar residence, Teja Singhji came limping on a cane. When everyone had departed, Teja Singhji said he would stay for some time.

That "some time" was a moment of silence. If I now remember that time, I can still feel the moments tremble with an inner force. What secret lay behind his agony? The question couldn't come to my lips. But for a moment I thought I saw his lips quiver. He said, "People say that I am paralysed, but this is not paralysis, its the blood that's frozen in my body."

It wasn't the blue sky above but it was the roof of the room that his piercing gaze looked at. Not at the ceiling, but beyond... towards eternity.

I had heard the name of a young woman associated with him: uttering that very name softly, he said: "Amrita bibi don't you think that if she suddenly comes and calls out to me with her voice, won't this frozen blood in my body...will it not melt?"

Teja Singhji's words still hang in the air – that air which blows through the corridors where lovers reside.

And I felt this was the same air which rustled up the leaves of that tree, which, by the meditation of someone's feelings, makes it a blessed one.

And baked in the intensity of love the tree stands, fulfilling the wishes of the people that come.

Meeting with a Poet-Politician

IT was one of my poems which introduced me to Jawaharlal Nehru. I met him for the first time at the house of Krishna Menon, where Sophia Wadia, Editor of the magazine PEN, was also present. Sophia Wadia had come from Bombay for a meeting of PEN at Delhi. I too was invited, being a member of PEN. That evening Jawaharlal Nehru invited the members of PEN to tea at Teen Murti. There someone told him that Amrita had written a poem on him.

India had attained freedom just then, so I had written a small poem on the dawn of a new era in India. It was addressed to Jawaharlal Nehru. The poem was printed in a few dailies. I would not have talked to him about it, but when someone else made a mention of it Jawaharlal came forward, put an arm around me and said: "Why didn't you tell me about the poem? What have you written in it?"

I did not remember the whole poem but I recalled a few of the verses addressed to him and recited these:

*O prince of hearts!
Today holding you robe
This land has turned a new face.*

I read his book *Discovery of India* many years later, but on

that day, after listening to these lines; he laughed and pressed me to his side, and I felt I had touched the poet in him. Such a spontaneous and natural reaction can come only from a poet, not from one who is a mere politician.

Later, when All India Radio began a programme of poetic symposium of all languages on January 26, Jawaharlal Nehru inaugurated the function. It was actually his idea that a literary and cultural communication in all the languages of India could be brought about through such programmes. I met him again then and found the same recognition in his eyes which I saw when I recited my poem to him when we first met.

When the Sahitya Academy was established in Delhi, he was its Chairman. I met him often in the years that followed.

October, 1962 brought havoc when all of a sudden China attacked our country, Jawaharlal Nehru, breaking this news to the nation with a heavy heart, said: "If there is any lapse, it is in the culture of that land. There is no lapse in us...."

These are words that still ring alive in my ears. It is a historical event when a country is attacked, and here was the leader of that country describing his anguish in terms of culture.

It was a reflection of his personality that when he left this world on May 27, 1964 my pain took the shape of some poems, in words like "Tears of Blood":

*On the branches of Earth,
Many flowers of flesh blossom
Many flowers of flesh fade away...!
But he was such a flower who blossomed
And he was such a flower who withered
The earth never felt so happy and laughed
The earth never wept so deeply as well
What a flower! What a fragrance
That flower died, but the fragrance refused to die.*

A phulkari in my hands, I was about to stitch a pattern when the needle broke.

Mother Chronicle heaved a deep sigh.

Agnes trembled and saw in the dark eye of the East the sun shining like a tear!

Meeting a King – Yogi

It was March 1, 1961 when I received a telegram from the President of Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh: "I send you my friendliest admiration and kindest regards".

This telegram underlined the fact that he had read my poem.
In 1957 I had written a poem.

*What a king, what a yogi is he
Who pulls from the heels of life a thorn,
Who at midnight lends a hand at the grinding mill.
Time witnessed a lamp
Brightening the dark alleys of life.
The blowing winds are asking the soil of Vietnam
Who has wiped the tears from the cheeks of history?
The earth at dawn dreamed a bright vision
In the fields of the sky
Someone has sowed the sun
On the autumn paths
I saw pink footed flowers
Which love of man is it
Whose words have transformed the people?*

A translation of this poem was published in the Vietnam paper *Nhandan* on May 25, 1958. I had a desire inside me while writing this poem that the face which was in front of me would at

least go through it, even though I was aware that the President does not read all the newspapers of the country. It was three years later that the telegram came, acknowledging that he had read it.

Ho Chi Minh was a politician and a poet too. Though I had read his poems and the diary he wrote in jail much later, I had seen the poet inside him earlier when I had met him in Delhi at a reception held in his honour. I was introduced to Ho Chi Minh with the words that I was a poet. Stepping up to me he kissed my forehead and said: "We are both soldiers, fighting against the wrongs of the world. I fight with the sword and you with your pen."

My eyes misted at his words. Felt that I was seeing for the first time a soldier who saw life as a vision of poetry but had a sword in his hand.

In Ho Chi Minh's face I saw the radiance emanating from life. And that was the reason when I wrote the poem, a few days later, that I called him a king and a saint too. What kind of a flower was he that could bloom in the autumn of a political atmosphere...?

I came to know later that his saintly self was not only the truth of my poem but also the truth of Vietnam's history.

It surprised me that the President of a nation still lived in a tent. And that there was one typewriter which lay in one corner and in another his cycle. And he had one change of clothes. One to wear and the other to wash. His way of thinking was that till the people of his country could afford more than two sets of clothes, he too would have only two sets, like his people.

Meeting Ho Chi Minh first became a reality in my poem and then in the subsequent years it brought a realisation with many dimensions.

What was wrong and where. That he fought with a sword and I with a pen...

I am watching the whole social scenario, outlooks which have cast aside the weak, calling them untouchable and settling them far away in huts, and calling the powerful gods and shutting them up in temples. Thus to protect their wrongs they have discarded

both the powerful and the weak from society.

The words “dishonour” and “honour” they have erected at two ends of society as guards and in between, for their sole ends they have safeguarded their wrongs.

And one can see that the wrong that has been spread at one end has been taken up by society generally while the other by politics. It is the conspiracy of that wrong which has spread from arranged marriages to arranged riots.

It is a state of helplessness in which every thought of mine goes through agony. Sometimes a few words drop on paper like drops of blood. And that moment of my meeting with Ho Chi Minh quivers within me.

The Black Line

MY son was ill for quite a few days. To leave him and go to my job was an unpleasant choice. That day too, I was going to work for if I didn't then that day's earning would be cut for I was on daily wages in All India Radio. Also the medicines were expensive and I had to buy them that day for they had finished. The child entreated me to stay on. To pacify him I was about to turn from the doorstep when the postman gave me two letters.

For the time being the child's plea subsided for I stayed back to read the letters. I opened one of the letters, it was from a well wisher. "I am sorry Amrita, your book has not been prescribed for any university course. You know merit doesn't count, one needs recommendations in the right places Amrita. I can't understand your principles, not to approach the proper authorities in power."

I kept my child occupied by asking him to peel the stamps from the envelopes. While swallowing the disappointment, I opened the second letter. It was from Sadat Hasan Manto. The letter was stamped in Pakistan. "Amrita I have never cried in life except once when my son died and again today when a friend of mine was reading a poem of yours to me, in which the moon whom the children lovingly called "Chandamama" loses its brightness in the land where people are enslaved."

The euphoria I felt was as if I had sold thousands of copies of

my book, as if my job had been confirmed. And the fever of my child had disappeared.

This was in 1955. The next day I wrote to Manto. By the time I could receive his reply, I heard Manto had died.

Krishan Chander, with a heavy heart, wrote: "A.I.R. has not observed the death of Manto, which had broadcast hundreds of plays written by Manto. The Urdu bazar is not closed, which had sold thousands of copies of Manto's books and are still selling." Krishan Chander wrote with blood in his eyes: "Manto was not a minister for whom the flags are lowered, neither was he a mafia king for whom the bazars would shut down. He was a writer, a writer for the poor. He wrote about the shoemakers, prostitutes, the tongawalla, — so who would weep for such a man."

And I was thinking on the one side we have the politicians, who can cut the pockets of people in the name of national interest. But they are honourable men. Perhaps that is the criteria of being honourable. And on the other side is Manto whose "Pick-pocket" to escape the ignominy of self, cuts off his own hands. But he is ignoble, perhaps this is the mark of integrity."

Manto observed the women's hands which throughout the night kept separating the flowers from the thorns. And she spreads the petals on her bed while the thorns she presses to her heart. And that is the reason why in Manto's stories the fragrance of the roses doesn't emanate but the smell of freshly oozing blood comes out.

Manto has observed those people whose inner soul had died long ago. And the corpse-like humans whenever they pass by leave behind a peculiar smell of death. When Manto describes all this in his story "Cold Flesh" (Thanda Gosht) the people condemn him as writer of obscenity."

Manto wrote many stories for whose unlucky people for whom life is a continuous death.

And when Manto wrote the story about "Knife" which makes a little sound "Kurch" as it enters and then pierces the slender neck of someone. And when Manto describes the knife which at one moment is in one's hand and the next moment in someone's

back. And when he wrote "Scissor" which cut the country in two parts, then God alone knows the filth that were heaped upon him by the men behind the "Scissors" and Knives".

Writing in pain, Krishan Chander feels that in this crowded city no one has a moment to leave his work and remember Manto. "He searches for Abdul Ghani, a tailor, whom once, Manto couldn't pay the tailoring charges for a suit. The tailor refused to take the money after reading his story "Hattak" (Humiliation). The tailor couldn't be found with whom he could share his grief. In the meantime the tongawalla says: "Sahib, hire another tonga, I cannot go on you know Manto has died."

I think that today it has become difficult for the tongawalla to drive but the people who can make a woman cry will be happy because there won't be anybody who can slap the snobs and write a story about that society like "Khol Do". And there will no more be stories like "Tobha Tek Singh" being penned.

Manto wrote many letters to Uncle Sam. Letters regarding foreign policy, seeped in bitterness. And Uncle Sam must be wondering why such nephews are born. But now that he is no more, he'll be happy for no more will there be letters. He knows that nephews like Manto are born once in a life time.

The winds of change, observing the turmoils around, reminded me of a Russian story in which a young maiden asks her grandmother the secret of those flowers in whose colours, if the threads are dipped and boiled, the colours become fast and remain for a lifetime. So she searches for the flowers to colour her threads. And from those threads she weaves a portrait of Lenin. The portrait is almost finished when she hears, Lenin is no more. To put a black border around the portrait she blackens the thread quickly with whatever black colour she could find, because she had no time to get the colour from the flowers. Days pass, rain, storms come and go. The black border becomes discoloured. Though the rest of the portrait of Lenin dyed from the colours of flowers gets a brighter sheen.

There is not much difference between the black border around Lenin's portrait which was a symbol of sorrow and the line

around the name of Manto was a symbol of insinuation. And I was convinced that the end of both the stories would be the same. Time will come when the black line around the name of Manto will fade out and Manto's name will glow in the field of literature.

And after sometime when Manto's stories were translated and were being published in Tunjahi, I was asked to write an introduction of one of his books. I wrote the introduction with a heavy heart based on the above story.

Sound and Silence

ZULFIA Khanum was the first woman poet to become my friend. She came to India in 1957 to attend the first Asian Writers Conference held in Delhi. She spent a few hours with me in the morning the day she was supposed to read out her poems at the conference. She recited to me her saddest poem which she had written on her lover-husband Hamid Alam Jan's death. While reciting the poem she broke down, like the words that dropped from her poem. And that evening when she refused to read her poem at the conference she said that after reading out one of her poems to Amrita it was impossible for her to read out another one. At that moment I had admired the real poet in her; it led to a lasting friendship.

Before departing for home she and some other Russians came over to my house for tea. Those days I had bought some green, yellow, orange and white tea cups. While I was about to pour the tea Zulfia spoke: "Amrita don't give me tea in the yellow cup. Yellow denotes separation. And see that you too don't use a yellow cup. We both have become tired of writing poems on the agony of love. Now there should be no pain in our friendship".

Four years later when I went to Uzbekistan in 1961 at the invitation of Tashkent College I recited a Punjabi rendering of Zulfia's poem, while she rendered one of my poems in Uzbek. And when we both were given silken embroidered caps, a spe-

ciality of Uzbekistan, Zulfia, looking at me, whispered in my ear: "You look a typical Uzbek woman". And the next day when we visited a cloth mill we were presented silken veils. Thanking them for the veils, I turned to whisper in Zulfia's ear: "God's word, you look like a Punjabi woman".

I stayed for about fifteen days at Zulfia's house. Without an interpreter, we tried to convey our intimate thoughts with the help of different languages. We somehow managed an aura of intimacy and warmth, which we couldn't have had in the presence of an interpreter.

At the farewell party arranged for me an Indian poet, Ali Sardar Zafari, was also present. He felt the strong bond between Zulfia and me. And when Zulfia said: "If we translate Amrita's name in Uzbek it becomes "Amritakhanum", but sounds better as "Ulmuskhanum. Ali Sardar Zafari at that moment toasted Zulfias in Hindi, and named her "Alka Kumari".

When my turn came to toast, I composed a couplet:

*When the pen embraces the paper,
The secrets of love come out.*

One line in Punjabi and one in Uzbek, still it rhymed.

That day I had worn an Uzbek dress while Zulfia wore a sari. There was no demarcation of countries in our friendship.

While staying with Zulfia I came to know how Hamid Alam Jan was a great poet and lover. Whenever Zulfia felt hurt, he would write a poem. I saw those papers which he would slip under her pillow, where she lay annoyed. A few lines from those letters tell their story:

*With threads of spring,
If I wove a cloth,
Would you be happy?
Combining all the poetry of the world,
If I wrote a song of your beauty,
Would you be happy?*

I came to know that even though her husband had been dead

for many years, whenever Zulfia writes a poem, she goes to her husband's grave and leaves it there.

That day I bought some white flowers and laid them at Hamid Alam Jan's grave. And Zulfia, with eyes filled, said: "Look Hamid! Amrita has come. Your sister-in law"

The Meeting of the Four

IT was my birthday, 31st of August, the year 1976, when early in the morning, the phone rang in my hotel room in Belgrade, to say that somebody was waiting for me at the reception. Going down I found to my surprise Mahteme Salaises, Prince of Ethiopia standing with a bouquet of flowers to wish me, on my birthday

A few days earlier we had travelled together in a car from Satruga to the southern part of Yugoslavia. From our conversation, while travelling I had come to know that he had been wounded during the war, on the right arm. And the arm that had played the violin now could not touch the strings. And it seemed as if the music had frozen deep inside him. I took the flowers and thanked him. It was on the same day when I had to go to Kragujevac about 100 miles from Belgrade. It was on the 21st of October, 1941, when the whole population of the city was massacred by the German army.

Amongst the population of 7000 there were also some 300 school children who were killed. To memorate them, a stone monument stands as a symbol of the seven thousand tombs of the dead, Kragujevac.

Pained, I stood thinking that what kind of a birthday it is, that I get flowers from a prince in whose breath music lies frozen and here there is a statue which stands as a symbol of the 7000 dead. Touched by the moment, I had written a poem then.

*"There was a time when on the paper soil of this earth,
 The city was written like a statement,
 The people like words lay.
 Like a poem of thousand lines
 and everyone like alphabets
 This Kragujevac mirrors the history.
 A witness of that time.
 When the inner beauty died.
 When the intellect wept.
 When humanity was murdered.
 At the hands of the human beings.*

My poem being in Punjabi could not convey the deep anguish I had felt for the people of that place. I knew there was one poetess Desanka Maksimovic who had written a poem on this terrible tragedy. That poem 'The Legend of Blood' is considered to be a historic poem of that country. Her poem had already been translated into English. So I translated the same in Punjabi.

*"Fifty five minutes before death.
 A handful of dreams, secrets of life
 In their pockets,
 The children were solving the problems of maths in class.
 A frightening roar came,
 In a flash all were killed,
 One bullet to each,
 The lesson was partially over
 But nothing else was left."*

That night I felt a deep desire to meet Desanka but this desire could not be fulfilled during my stay there. She was too old to meet anyone, I came to know.

It was 1983 when I participated in the peace conference in Bulgaria that I saw Desanka. Bulgaria and Yugoslavia did not have cordial relations, but the government of Bulgaria could hardly refuse Desanka from participating in the peace conference. This was another side of her which attracted me. And the next

afternoon, was an afternoon when the four different directions met each other.

When one talks of Bulgarian poetry the name of Elisaveta-Bagriana comes foremost to the mind. And she was a friend of mine since 1966, to such an extent that we had even exchanged our silken scarves, while reading our poems.

Blaga Dimitrova is a revolutionary name in the field of modern poetry and even to the present times, all Bulgarians live in awe of her. Her friendship towards me was something which was not extended towards many of her contemporaries. When I first met her in the presence of an interpreter, we had a formal lunch. But next morning, she came alone and knocked on my room's door. Embracing me she said, "I want to have a heart to heart chat, which is not possible with other people around." Accepting the friendship which I valued, I had translated many of her poems into Punjabi.

It was the afternoon of the 28th – 1953 when Bagriana invited Desanka and me to her residence. Our meeting was like the four directions coming to an embrace.

I don't know how this news leaked out, suddenly saw a photographer who said, "This is historic meeting. Let me capture it on film.

While he snapped our photographs I laughed and said to Bargiana, "Friend you had written a poem. – "That I am the blood sister of wind, water and wine, Nobody can hold me" but this camera is capturing your body on film." Bargiana laughed and said, "only my body not my spirit."

Blaga had smiled and had said, Amrita, you remember I had written a poem, "The tree where the sun resided was cut by an axe and then turned into paper. On that paper I always write about that tree where once the sun resided. The same way this photograph of ours will be like that tree where once we met."

Yearn for Coin

A surprise it was when a pretty, cheerful woman came to see me in the afternoon of 25 September, and said, "I know you are a writer of India, but I have not read you; I've only heard that you are a strong-willed woman and you lived the way you wanted. And I wanted to see such a woman, so I've come...."

Surprised, I felt happy and contented: to live as one wanted to live was so remarkable!

This was Madam Dagmar Celeste, wife of the Governor of Ohio, an American State.

"Your home is very lovely," so saying she looked at all the lamp-shades, one by one, on which Imroz has painted poems. Inquiring about the meanings of the poems, she asked me, "What is the issue—of the characters of your novels?"

I said, "The basic issue is the man-woman relationship, that reaches the relationship of man with man, expanding to the relationship between country and country...."

She asked pointedly, "Why is the man-woman relationship so complicated?"

I laughed and said, "Because the woman is incomplete, so far, and so is the man. We give the name of love to the pull of youth and beauty, or to the lure of some comforts and conveniences, but a happening like love can occur only between a complete woman and a complete man...."

"What is your idea of a complete woman?" she asked me earnestly, and I replied: "One who is independent economically, emotionally and culturally. Freedom can't be begged, nor can it be seized; it can't be put on: it rises from the dust of the body...."

She said even more earnestly, "You people may feel that the American woman is very free, but this is not true...."

I said, "Certainly, it can't be true. Were it so, the American attitude towards other countries would have been of equality; being a free country she would have respected the freedom of other countries...."

Then Madam Dagmar asked a profound question: "What is it for which you are proud of being an Indian woman?"

I said, "It's obvious that compared with the well-developed countries, India has still a long way to go. But India has something which the developed countries do not have: our ancient cultural heritage. We are not aware of it today, but it is there in our blood. I am proud of being an Indian woman because, four thousand years before Christ, a woman of this land gave a concept to the world that is not there in any other country's heritage, even today, after six thousand years. No law of the world could comprehend it. In one of the *Rigveda* hymns Surya Savitri says: As the redness of the Dawn meets the Sun, may there be the collyrium of knowledge in her eyes; in her hands Vedic verses as offering for her lover; scholars of the world their priests, and freedom their bed... I found the affirmation of my view not from any reality of today but from this six thousand year old reflection...."

Then Madam Dagmar opened a shiny tiny box and said, "I've brought this as a present for you. For the first time in our country the head of a woman is stamped on the dollar. This woman was Susan B. Anthony, who raised her voice for the American woman's right to vote. It was a long struggle for her. In America, before 1920 women had no right to vote...."

For me it was a very pretty and precious gift. I thanked her. She said, "Now we have to fight another battle. I, you, all of us know that only America has got the power to destroy the world.

That is why the power to save the world from destruction is also hers. We have to rouse her conscience....”

This was a memorable moment of my life, for I saw a face drenched with a glow of conscience.

Passionately I held Dagmar’s hand in mine and said, “Friend, if this were to happen at your hands, if the conscience of America is awakened and the world peace assured, the dollar on which your head is stamped I’ll call the first coin of peace....”

The Pulse of Time

I don't know – when for the first time our Heer Bibi while praising Allah, had uttered Ranjha's name, instead of Allah's. And what had transpired at that time only the heart knows....

The song I had written, reminiscent of that moment of ecstasy, was playing on the cassette player in my room—

Allah, who is this man that instead of your name, his name comes to my lips....

In Asha Bhonsale's voice the lines of this song seemed to swim in the seven oceans of musical notes. When suddenly before my eyes, two hands rose in the air, as if asking for God's blessings....

Along with it a man's voice was heard.

Oh God!

Last years unfulfilled wishes

Like pigeon's head tucked away in the wings,

Sit sadly on the heart's brim

Send them a gust of fulfilment.

Seemed as if someone had wrapped up the mat of time and cast aside the era of Heer and Ranjha and taking of my unfortunate past year, standing barefoot on the naked threshold of a New Year, saying – this is the first wish of the New Year.

Oh God!

*Before the children of my
town reach the age of voting,
Give them the strength to withstand,
The strains of truth's journey.*

A vein in my forehead tightened, it became a pain – the same pain as if asking-God! Whose hands are these raised aloft in prayer.

Talking of the strength of those votes on which stands the politics.... Those who cast the votes have become so tired from the journey of truth that anyone can grease their palms and buy from their listless hands the votes....

Seemed – they were the hands of a healer who was searching for the pulse of the times. A voice was coming....

Oh God!

*In the Colony of sweepers.
When in the early morning mist
head covered,
They go out to sweep
And their wishes
Like straws of their broom,
scatter....*

And the voice is asking in prayer–

*Away from G.T. Road
Mud houses, ensnared in the unpaved roads
Children sit in courtyards,
with their plates
Fill them! With tandoori rotis
and home made butter.*

The pain in my head stares at me – God!

Oh God!

*Give the fresh tandoori rotis
and home made butter
But keep away the crow, from them.*

Felt as if the saviour had found out the pulse of reason for the people's hunger and sorrow. And that's why it is talking about the "Crow" who could snatch away the roti from the hands of the people. Also of the cages where the dreams and wishes are trapped like rats—

Oh God!

The rats are numerous, they gnaw at memories.

And at night when people set the traps

Instead of rats,

Their dreams get caught.

Oh God!

Save the dreams of my people

from the rat traps.

I was thinking to which town and to what country he belonged, who was talking of a town, of my country.

Oh God!

At the hands of Bhopal's poisonous gas,

Mothers and sisters that died.

Open the doors of heaven for the sons and old,

And give the sanction for the celebration

Of that little baby's birthday

Whose picture I have seen

Body entombed, the head sticking out

His eyes have become hollow

But still looks at me.

Laughs, smiles

An atomic explosion pales in his laughter

To break one's heart

Faster than any rocket or missile.

Oh God! For the child's sake.

Stop this race from atom bombs, rockets and missiles

So that the seeds of peace may grow.

Felt that the one who stood on the naked floor of the new year, barefoot asking for blessings and unwrapped the mat of time and

spread it out again. And I too, amazed like Heer Bibi, was saying – God! Who has come!

At the same time I realize – The meaning of the word ‘Heer’, has different connotations. In some period, sometime, she was just a beautiful woman. But now it were human beings who, had become lovers of their own conscience...and I was speaking in reference only – Allah! Who is it, that has come. And that person who was asking for new year’s blessings, must have known about the state of my mind and his voice came–

Oh God!

In the coming years

In the stories and poems

Bring forth, peace and love!

Gabriel-Garcia, Milan Kundera,

and Amrita Pritam

In their writings.

Keep up the spirit!

*And give them the strength to
write new truths.*

My eyes filled. From my astonished mouth – Amen! gasped out. The same voice rose in memory–

Oh God!

Written in the lantern’s light

Grant me this prayer.

And may be the lantern’s flame had risen higher and in its light I saw the name of the one who had been praying – Mazhar-ul-Islam.

Saw, Mazhar-ul-Islam’s hands reach out, beyond the boundaries of Pakistan! And my hands unhesitantly reach out – outside the borders of India and I too became a partner to his prayer.

Oh God!

Give us all poets and writers

The strength to write new truths.

Words Converted to Silences

ONE day Khushwant Singh, while showing me some graves around Mehrauli, asked me about the history behind the ruins of Delhi. I replied instantly, 'See, Khushwant, I don't read history, I create history.' The reality was that I did not know anything about the history of ruins around Delhi.

Khushwant, disappointment in his voice, said, 'If you don't know whose graves these are then how do you write stories?' I laughed, 'What have I got to do with these graves, I am alive and I write about myself.'

'I don't write stories about myself,' said a sad Khushwant.

And then one day during a long discussion Khushwant said, 'I have seen many revolutions and convulsions of society. I have met people like Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Sanjay Gandhi, Bhutto, Mujibur Rehman, Zia-ur-Rehman, General Tikka Khan and many other world figures, whose feet of clay I have also seen.'

In journalism Khushwant has a different style – a bold style with a strong overtone of sexuality. But in real life he is a fine, very dependable person.

And that day when he was passing through those tender moments, I could say without any hesitation, 'Neither I nor anyone

else has a right to touch your inner self but you can touch your raw nerve with your own hands.'

I was surprised when Khushwant taking a deep breath, said, "All my life I have been afraid of falling in love, lest I place myself at the mercy of another person, who may hurt me. In this way, out of this fear, I have deprived myself of the richest experience that a human can enjoy. This is to surrender yourself completely, give all you have of your emotions and receive whatever another may give you in return. Now that I approach the sunset hour of my life, I am obsessed with the desire to fill this lacunae. Will I now find, someone for whom I could sacrifice all I have and who will return it to me, full measure? This is hardly likely. But I will cherish this illusion to the last day or take it half-fulfilled to the crematorium." After these words a silence overtook Khushwant and me.

Later, when I was writing a book on dreams and wanting to know how much one could interpret dreams with the knowledge of astrology, I met Khushwant, again.

It was a day of surprise, when Khushwant said, 'My dreams always terrorise me. The fear of death always hangs around me. Whoever I love, whether it be my father, mother or children, I see their death in my dreams. I can never walk through a graveyard in the night. Many times I have seen myself going to a big gathering but find myself half-naked there. I feel scared... and the strangest thing that occurs is that women whom I have never desired become my partners in bed.'

Acharya Raj, a pandit of Rajasthan, who is a great astrologer, interpreted the dreams for the book I was writing, that is why he was also there with me while meeting Khushwant. Acharya Raj noted down the details regarding Khushwant's birth.

After a gap of a few days, when I met Acharya Raj, he said, 'Rahu is the source of dreams and Rahu is in the fifth house of the moon horoscope of Khushwant Singh. That is in the sign of Saturn. That is the reason why Saturn has filled his dreams with fear.'

I asked, 'For the man for whom nothing is unattainable, why

then does he get dreams of undesired sex?’

Acharya Raj explained, ‘Look, the moon is in the first house, Jupiter is in the seventh house, in his own sign. Both are auspicious planets. Therefore, they cannot let any inauspicious thing happen. You know that the auspicious planets cannot allow anything forbidden to be enacted through the body. But due to the fourth aspect of Mars on the Moon some forbidden act is a must and that is the reason why that forbidden action takes place – not through the body but in the mind, in the dreams. The state of his mind can be called *mental mating*.’

I again asked, ‘Can his dreams be a symbol or a sign of some danger?’ He said, ‘No. Like mental mating the danger seen will always remain as mental danger, which has nothing to do with reality. This is the analysis of his dreams.’

It was at this moment that Khushwant rang me. ‘Amrita if you are writing about my dreams, if you dare, then write this. A few years back when I was translating your novel, I often saw Puro, the heroine of your novel, in my dreams and sometimes watching Puro, I would find myself looking at you.’

I laughed...said, ‘Yes, I’ll dare to write about it, for now I know the secret behind your dreams. It’s a game your mind plays, it has nothing to do with the real world. It has nothing to do with any suppressed desires or longings.’

The earpiece hummed...there was silence on the other side.

The Psychology of Fate

IN the Bulgarian town of Varna there is a festival which occurs on every fullmoon night, on the shores of the sea. The people pick a poet and felicitate him by reading out his works. The poet himself recites a couple of his poems. Then the actors and actresses with great joy read out his poems. Submerged in the mood of the session, the audience then has a question-answer session, where the poet answers them one by one. This function ends on a note of great fellow-feeling.

A function was once held to honour my poems. A question was asked by the audience as to why the marriages of poets and writers were not successful. And what should be done about this problem. At that time, in reply, I laughingly had said that the woman forgets when she marries an artiste that she is his second wife. Similarly a man who marries a woman artiste, too, forgets that he is her second husband. The fact is, every artiste's first marriage is with his art.

In the morning, I saw that my answer had become the talk of the town. In the evenings in cafes, writers, poets and artists were all jockingly asking one another – “Friend! How's your second wife? Madam I hope your second husband is all right.”

It was a social relationship between man and woman, which I had solved at the mental level. But I was surprised when I met some people who had actually practiced it in life. They had given

life a “many dimensional” approach, away from the narrow meanings that society had evolved. To them, marriage was much more than being wed.

Kripal Kazak is a good story writer from Punjab and it’s a fact that till 1987 he had been married 27 times. He first married in 1960, on the eighth of “ashad”, a girl called Surjit. Both of them vowed to keep alive their love and the flame of their marriage burning. So every year, they leave their house on the same day and disappear for three days. The children are left in the care of friends, relatives or some neighbours, while they go to the house of a close friend, where preparations for the marriage have already been done. Friends become the bridegroom’s party while the wife comes from the bride’s party. Songs of “ghori” and “sahag” are sung. Sweets are distributed to the neighbours. The marriage rites are carried out in detail. The bride puts “mehendi”, she wears bangles and the red bridal suit. The “gana” is tied on the man. After the marriage ceremony, a room is bedecked with flowers where the first night is celebrated with the lifting of the veil to have the first glimpse of the bride.

Similarly, I had met a Christian woman called Shoba who had been engaged to be married before India was partitioned. After partition a calamity befell the two Christian families. One family, the girl’s came to India, while the boy’s family stayed back in Pakistan. When war broke out between India and Pakistan, Shoba’s father decided to marry her in India. Unsure of the political situation, he thought – “If I marry my daughter where she was engaged the situation might change and by sending her across the border I may never see her again.”

So the decision was sent and along with it the reasons to the other side. The boy’s mother wrote back accepting the fate. But she asked for one thing. Since now she could not make Shoba the bride of the house, at least let her always wear the bangles only from this house, no matter whom she marries. Today that girl is a full-grown woman, a mother of two, but the bangles she wears on her hands come from that house into which she had not even stepped inside.

The third incident! Because of its sensitivity, I cannot give names nor can I tell its location. But it is true. Before Partition one Hindu boy fell madly in love with a dainty Muslim girl. The Partition came. The Hindu boy had to cross the border to the other side from where he could not come back.

The man got married. Children were born. Then came a chance to go across the border to meet the same pretty, beautiful girl. She had bloomed into womanhood. The madness of their love culminated with the Muslim girl coming to India with him.

A house was made for the girl away from his native village, in another village. He bought some land so that he could come and go on the pretext of farming. It remained a secret for quite some years.

In this period his children had grown up. So much so that his daughter was married off. Then one incident occurred. The Muslim girl, after giving birth to twins, died. The man was left with three-day-old wailing babies and no place to keep them. So he took his son-in-law into confidence and asked his help. The son-in-law dried his father-in-law's tears, put out his hand in friendship and took the babies to his house.

Fate had created a strange reason for justification. For one day before this happened, a son was born in that son-in-law's house. But he died after a few hours. The news hadn't reached the relatives, so the news was spread amongst the relatives that twin girls had been born. And the woman who according to custom was the step sister of the twins, fed the babies on her milk and raised them.

Today when I look at those two young girls, I am reminded of that girl who not only brought them up with her own milk but who also nursed the biggest secret, that of her father's, within her breast.

I looked at her husband's face, who had given them the word "father", which no law in the world could have given them.

Enlightened by Words, Solaced by Words

IN front, a heavily laden river flowed. But there was a turbulence in it. Waves would rise, strike the quietly sleeping bank, as if it were trying to wake it by its persistent lapping of the bank. The foam that rose from the lips of the waves seemed to say something to the wet banks.

May be the river's bank understood the language of the waves. For when the waves reared up and threw a heavy body towards the bank, it embraced the body in its arm.

I saw – it was a bunched up body of a man, which the river bank had gently laid to rest. Soon the ascending sun's rays began opening and massaging the limbs of the body with its palms.

My sleep was suddenly broken. But a question wrapped itself around me. The dream, to which I was an onlooker, what was that dream?

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Slowly an event from his story crept out of the subconscious into the conscious mind of mine.

The conscious mind said, "There is a tale in the Mahabharata that when Vashist Rishi's son died, he wanted to drown himself in the river, for he felt that life had become meaningless. Tying

his hands and feet, in the darkness of night, he gave himself up in the river. But the waters of the river got scared. For if Vashist Rishi died, they would be blamed for the death of a saint. So the waters forced open the ropes that bound the hands and feet and gently laid him on the bank.

I was amazed that a tale which was embedded in the Mahabharata many ages ago, had come out of its words to stand before me?

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“How” I didn’t know but I began to get the answer of “why”. It was a pain that is embedded in my very veins, Punjab, the land where rishis and the learned had tilled the land, with their heart and mind, Punjab, the same earth today, why was it being seeped in the blood of its own people, at the hands of its own people? And so many like instances from history came and stood before me.

To the west was the Sindhu river and to the east the river Saraswati. The whole area was called the *Sap Sindhu*. In between flowed the five rivers. Jhelum of today was called the *Vitasta*. Chenab was *Askin* and *Chandrabhaga*. The river Ravi was called *Arushani* and *Irawati*. The Sutlej *Shatadru*. The river Vyas (Beas) was called *Vipasha*.

It was named, *Vipasha* because it had freed and unbound Vashist Rishi. These were the five rivers *Panch Aab*. What is Punjab today was named after the rivers.

On the banks of these rivers, in the forests around it, were born the rishis, whose works produced the world’s first book – the *Rig Veda*. The same Vashist Rishi who wrote so many verses of the *Rig Veda* was a *Purohit* (priest) in Raja Sodas’s Court, who ruled the area between the Ravi and Vyas rivers.

Kamadhenu, the cow that fulfilled what all one wished for, was in Vashist Rishi’s ashram, “Vishwamitra” was also a priest in Raja Sodas’s Court and it was the same Vishwamitra who had, written the *Gayatri Mantra*.

Agastya Rishi, was the son of Mitra Varun and Urvasi, who

was the twin brother of Vishwamitra. He too had written many *Slokas* in the Vedas and also the *Brahmpuran*. Out of the Twenty seven *Brahmavadiniyas* who had written verses in the Rig Veda, one was *Sundari Lopamudra*. She was the wife of Agastya Rishi. Another rishi of Rig Veda was *Shibi* who belonged to the same area, which today is called *Jhang* and *Sherkot*.

The name *Kathopanishad* came from the Kath people. These people lived in the area between the rivers Vyas and Ravi. One sun temple, considered to be the first of its kind in India, was erected by *Shambh* on the river *Chandrabhaga* in Punjab. Kaushalya, who gave birth to such an illustrious son as Rama, was born in *Guram* Village, which is a couple of kilometres away from Patiala.

Sumitra, who had given birth to Laxman, was from *Dusuha* village, near Hoshiarpur.

Taxila University had a great name where all sorts of *Shastras* were taught. It was to the east of river Sindhu. *Panini's Vyakaran Shastra* (treatise on grammar) was acknowledged by the world's linguists as an excellent book. *Panini* was born in *Shalatur* a village near Taxila.

Chhand Shastra was named as *Pingal Shastra* after Pingal Muni. Pingal Muni was Panini's younger brother and was born in the same village Shalatur.

Patanjali Muni wrote the book *Mahabha. nya* where for the first time philosophical principles were explained. He was related to the *Wahik* tribes.

Today's Peshawar was *Purushpur*. In Raja Kanishka's time, it was a great centre for learning. Buddhist philosopher, *Vasumitra*, great thinkers like *Nagarjuna* and *Matrichet* lived at Purushpur. *Charak Muni*, writer of Ayurveda's oldest book "*Cherak Sanghita*" was born at *Purushpur*.

Banabhatta was the writer of such books as *Madambhari* and *Harhcharit*. He lived at *Sthanishwar* which is *Thanesar* today.

Mahabharat's writer *Krishna Dwaipayan*, who became famous by the name of *Vyas*, was from the village Basana in Karnal district.

Chanakya's name till today is famous for its historical *Chanakya Niti*. The same Chanakya whose name was *Vishnugupta* came from Taxila. *Kapalmochini Vidya* was the first book dealing with surgery in India, written by the great *Jeevankumar Bhrat*. He was born at Rajgarh.

Bharat Muni's Natya Shastra, one of history's famous books was associated with *Bharat Janpad*, which is today the area Thanesar, Kaithal, Karnal and Panipat.

Brahmgupta was a scholar of mathematics. He was born in *Bhilmal* village, which was quite close to Multan.

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I became agitated that this Punjab is the land where *Rig Vani*, *Krishna Vani*, *Gorakhvani* and *Nanakvani's* words rose in the air like the sun and blossomed like trees. The people basked in the word's sunlight (knowledge) and sat in the shadows of the trees. But today where has the sunshine gone, where has the solace of those trees gone?

And in Punjab where a sufi wind always blew, how could it be mixing hatred in the breaths of the people today? .

And my dream of today? Why did the waters appear before me filled with the bloodshed of today? When the waters always wanted to be free from bloodshed (Brahma Hatya).

And the dream, my sleeping eyes had seen, came out in the awakened eyes of mine in the shape of tears.

And I half asleep watched the rising sun, of today, as if asking it that once upon a time, your sunshine was such that by rubbing your palms on the body of Vashist Rishi, you saved him from death.

The sun doesn't answer and I feel that these words of mine too have lost their sunshine, and their solace.

Forty Years Long Road

THE word "Congratulation" is on the tip of my tongue. I want to congratulate the earth of my country on its fortieth year of independence but its earthen body lies soaking, here and there, in blood. That's why the word looks at my lips, that are silent in embarrassment....

I know my country is a wonderful place, where all kinds of religion, like multi-coloured flowers, bloom. But when I go to greet one of the gardens, I find apartheid. Except flowers of one colour all others are prohibited. And so outside every garden I am stranded....

I hear, there is going to be a celebration in one of the gardens. I go to see it. To protect themselves the flowers have posted armed guards all round....

I know our people are the descendants of the sun and the moon. So I go to wish them "good day" for the forty years of sunshine and wish "good night" for the forty years of moonlight. But I find that they have divided the light of the sun and moon into so many pieces of casteism that when a beam of sunlight touches another beam it becomes an untouchable. And one moonbeam is brought to book for touching another beam

I know that the philosophy of my country had given the cosmic energy the name of God and called it "Ardhnareshwar", which was a union of the male and female forces. But I didn't

know when one half of that God had become subservient and the other half the ruler. After Independence I had thought that the subservient half would have retained its right which it lost earlier, to rule. But nobody returned its right, as I see it....

And my country which forty years ago was split into two parts, even today in one part we find God's one half being sold as a thing of use sometimes at the behest of law and sometimes hoo'dwinking the law it is sold in the market. Then in the name of sati, she is burnt.

And across the boundary to the other piece of land, she is insulted so much in the courts of law that it needs the testimony of two women before it is accepted, which is equivalent to one man's testimony.

Education has reached our villages and hamlets, creating a few outlets for work. But its aim, like the city education doesn't develop the man from within.

Likewise science has progressed but in the shape of a powerful weapon, which in the grasp of a few might one day be the cause of our annihilation.

Any country's technical progress is related to the outlook of other countries, especially the super powers play a major role. That's why the industrial and technical progress our country has seen in the last forty years is co-related with the rest of the world's.

Now our pain can be absolved only by what was within our rights. In the struggle for our freedom it gave birth to many opportunities. But instead of achieving certain, well defined targets, we only gave rise to opportunism.

To explain my viewpoint, I want to put forth the four stages in the mental evolution of human beings, which Carl Jung had theorised. The first stage is that of physical strength which in Jung's words is the hero of the jungle. Jung's epitome of this stage is Tarzan. In the second stage Jung talks about Shelly, the poet, as a basis who completely immerses himself in an imaginative world, to get away from the bitter realities of the world. In the third stage Jung presents the word-game, played by politi-

cians, preachers of every religion and professional academicians. The fourth stage is about reaching at the truths, the meanings. Every thought to be implemented and every thought to be practical down to earth. Jung portrays Mahatma Gandhi, when he talks of the fourth stage. And we will have to accept that we haven't reached that stage yet, in spite of our forty long years of freedom to achieve it in....

This freedom gave us every opportunity to release us from the mental state of the primitive role of the jungle hero. But it didn't happen. And in every field whosoever got the opportunity in the name of our country, on religious grounds or in art and literature, he turned that power into a weapon for his own ends. And all sorts of corruption became an accepted fact.

As far as I can see, only the fourth stage, the spiritual development could free us from this mental slavery. It will not only build our future prospects but help us in leading the frightened countries around us. This is the stage where science and spirituality can join forces and free man from the fears of hot and cold wars.

This vision was the way our country considered it to be the world's most precious gift which one can give to someone and to receive from someone. It is to free others from fear and be free from the fear of others.

This perception even today is a part of our country, it is engrained in the sands of this land, even though it lies buried beneath the sand of times, unseen by anyone. I can say, it's in our psyche, it's in our unconscious, all we have to do is to recognise it consciously. And it will be this outlook which can change the remarkable progress in science under the spiritual light and free the universe from the psychosis of the fear of destruction.

The word, "Congratulation" which is on the tip of my tongue is for that mental progress which is the fourth stage of evolution.

There must have been a dream when the division of our country was made, which would have had a change to bloom fully and to spread its fragrance to its heart's content in one's own land. But these forty years have shown that the two pieces of land have looked at each other with suspicious eyes, to the extent

where they are afraid of each others nuclear progress.

When the state of mind mistrusts and hates it can lower itself to absymal depths of devilry.

And when one achieves the state of friendship, faith and love the mind transcends to unknown happiness.

So I cannot congratulate the fallen ones. So my words await on the tip of my tongue for the day when my people will rise above all petty things of life.

“Nobody Listens to Bishen”

BALLU Bishen was one of the 52 poets of Shri Guru Gobind Singh. I don't know what vision he carried about God and his Creation, and God alone knows what he wrote, but he left behind a line deeply etched in sadness whose echo still resounds in the air. That line: “Nobody listens to this fakir Ballu Bishen”.

There is a difference of an era in between but it's a fact today that all our poets have become Ballu Bishens. Nowadays conflicting conditions prevail. What the poets feel, what they are saying, the curse of Ballu Bishen has struck them, for nobody listens, it seems, to them.

Today our poet Dev, troubled, writes--

Punjab! what has happened to you?

Why! have you turned against your own self

And Minder, terribly puzzled, looking around, says:

A blanket on my shoulder, a flute in the hand,

I neither slept nor went anywhere.

*Then, who placed this corpse on my shoulder
and a gun in my hand.*

And our Ranjit Madhopuri asks the winds--

*The churner cries in the milk.
While spinning, the wheel weeps.
Oh! my loved one, which is your home?*

And our Mohanjcet goes about knocking at every friend's door and asks—

*Nobody tells! For no one is seen.
Where is my city?*

And Gul Chauhan, embracing all people, says—

*You all are mine.
You all are 'me',
For, you all are my hands
Without any one of
Your hands
I become handicapped.*

Jaswant Deed feeling helpless says—

*Where is the whole family going?
Bound to this earth.*

Savitoj in 'a voice that pierces the air—

*Don't walk those paths
That don't lead to the home.*

Our Rajbir stands like a question mark as a witness to our prevailing times—

Have the meanings of the human race changed?

And our Ravinderpal Kalra is asking the five elements that make this universe—

*Why am I a stranger,
Amongst my own people. Why! Oh! Why!*

And Gurtej Koharwala in a drowning voice speaks—

All talks are drenched in tears

*And the poems soaked in blood.
Our courtyards have become
The address of the dead.*

Ajmer Gill, with scratched and blood-stained hands, writes—

*The dish of food for my lover I prepared
The crows steal it away.*

And our Harbhajan Singh has got soaked in Ballu Bishen's sadness. He addresses his inner Sufi poet Bulle Shah

*Come Bulle, I'll see you off
Out of this village.*

We have all become Ballu Bishens today. Surprised, I go on looking towards the sight where, in the shadow of the sandal tree and behind Ashoka Vatika, near the bodhi tree, a demon tree has grown.

And in the whispering of this tree our people cannot hear our voice. And on the quivering lips of us all, the words are frozen

Nobody listens to this fakir Ballu Bishen.

Hello, My Dear Mike!

BORIS Pasternak and his beloved Olga Ivinskaya in their most intimate moments even in a blur of passion were conscious of a third presence between them. Friends had warned them about the hidden microphones within the four walls, but Pasternak, accepting the inevitable jokingly, referred to it as “My Dear Mike.” This Mike, though well concealed, has invariably stood between the writer and the world. Whether placed by the society, religion or politics writers and poets have had to deal with Mike perpetually.

Notwithstanding the literal meaning of the word “Mike,” it has more or less personified a spy, whether it is to be found in the centre of the political whirlpools, or in stigmas and taboos of society and religion. It stands between the writer and the world.

In the 17th century, there lived a Punjabi poet by the name of Suthra, who was famous for being outspoken. In those days, the Kazis (Islamic preachers) had a rather unique way of licking the tikka off the forehead of Hindus and converting them to Islam. There is a legendary story that one day Suthra wore a tikka of filth and went around the streets of Delhi, challenging the Kazis to come and lick it off his forehead. The challenge, of course, went unanswered. In his own way, Suthra had challenged Mike, as if saying..., “Hello, my dear Mike!”

Sometime back in Hungary I met a very good poet who had

spent four years in Siberia as a war prisoner. In 1948, when he was released, his pockets were searched and when they found some poems, he was put away for a year more. Today he has been honoured with the most prestigious national award. In spite of all his talent, he had to wait for nine years to have his first poem published in 1956!

Attila Jozsef, after whom the Attila Jozsef National Award came into being, was yet another poet who became a victim of Mike. One wonders what terror Mike emitted in form of thoughts and what morbid fear Mike put in his mind that he resigned to kill himself on the railway tracks.

When Henry Miller's book *Sexus* was banned, he wrote a long letter to his solicitor. Here are some of his lines: "I failed to be impressed, I must confess, by the weighty, often pompous or hypocritical, opinions adduced by scholars, literary pandits, psychologists, medicos, and such like..." "the offender who stands before the court is not being tried by his peers but by his dead ancestors."

There has never been, and probably there will never be, a time when the thinkers of the world can directly or indirectly escape Mike. Yes, there was a time once. According to a Dagistan saying, the first poet was born 100 years *before* the world came into existence. The author of this adage, perhaps a poet, was certainly disappointed by the public's inability to appreciate him. But he was at least happy that he did not have to contend with the Mikes of mediocrity, rigidity and hypocrisy in the neighbourhood.

I would not like to go into the details about all that was being published in the Punjabi papers about my autobiography in order to get it banned. But I would like to quote a Rumanian poet, Marin Sorescu:

Every evening I go across to my neighbours and borrow chairs from them, which I then arrange in my study and read out my poems to them. We have indeed a good evening of poetry; the chairs do not pretend to appreciate the poems nor do they censor them.

This is a very beautiful poem but is no solution to the problem. Sorescu was definitely hinting at the atrocity of the problem with which all of us are concerned. The only solution to my mind is that every thinker should smile and, with mental integrity, face the ever-present shadow in the face, saying, "Hello, my dear Mike."

The Fire that Burns Deep Within Us

ARTHUR Koestler by birth was a Jew. So in the holocaust of 1933, in Hitler's time, millions of books were burnt in the German cities, which included Koestler's books too. Again in 1952 in the Stalin era, 90 lakhs books were burnt in the Soviet occupied Germany and again Koestler's books were among those burnt. From the ashes of the second fire Koestler found a half burnt page of his book from which Koestler's name could be read. That half burnt page he framed and hung it on the outer wall of his room. And he used to say, "How many writers can claim to have their books burnt twice in their lifetime?"

It was 1987, in the month of December when suddenly Fakhar Zaman a Pakistani writer telephoned to say that he would stay with me for three days, in my house. After many years of waiting he had got this opportunity to visit India. He reminded me of Arthur Koestler's incident. I knew that all the books of Fakhar Zaman have been banned in his own country. And that he was not permitted even to visit India.

It was my first meeting with Fakhar Zaman, after having known him for many years by his writing only. And we spent these three days talking to our fill. And when he told me that all his collected works were being printed. I asked him, in reference

to Koestlers incident, "Since all your books are banned in Pakistan then wouldn't your collected works which get printed be confiscated". "Perhaps for the second time too and many be not, cause all the banned titles in the Government list are not the titles of my book" Fakhar Zaman said and laughing he added, "Though the titles inside are the same on the banned list". We laughed for a long time at the strangeness of the law, then Fakhar Zaman said, "On my book *Bandi Khana* somebody has made a play. The book is banned so it can't be published but the Government could not make up its mind on whether to allow the play based on my book to be staged or not. So it put a restriction that the play could not have a public show but could be staged for a private audience in some home. So we staged it in a friends big bungalow.

As many people that could be accommodated were let in. Benazir Bhutto too, came. Around the bungalow there was a police guard. A friend made a video film of the play though its quality was poor because it was made with a camera available at that time. But still, a sort of document was made.

Fakhars 'Bandi Khana' I had read. I could imagine the guts that were required to stage that play. In front of my eyes each character came and like a red streak of pain settled in my eyes.

Fakhar had said at that time, "I have brought that video to show it to you."

My first thought was how the government allowed him to bring the cassette but I remembered that he had come via Paris and not straight from Pakistan.

Watching the film I remembered the half burnt pages of Arthur Koestlers book, which hung on his wall.

I saw that Fakhar was smiling like Koestler and he was saying, "See the irony. By putting a ban on the book they have suppressed all the suffering of the people, calling it unlawful. But now many writers can claim the credit to have put it down on paper, the sufferings of the people."

Next day, on the 26th of December, an Institution of Delhi called "Kalamgar" arranged a reception in Fakhar's honour where an Urdu writer Qamar Raees presided and I was the Chief

Guest. The characters of Fakhars book were before my eyes. And when I was asked to say a few words as chief guest, I said "When Fakhar Zaman presents the character of Mr. Z in his novel "Bandi Khana", then Mr. Z says – "The man who was murdered yesterday was me. Today the man murdered was me. And the murder that is going to take place in the future, would be of me". Reading all this the frame of my mind said, "Z, is Fakhar Zaman and me too"

And while talking, all of a sudden I remembered Firaq Gorakhpuri who often used to tell one thing and taking his name I retold the same "Its a historic fact that the problem of heaven and hell was created when the people of the world questioned as to why the writers and poets absorb the sufferings of the down trodden and then write in pain, the rest of their life. And those who have nothing to do with the sufferings of the people, they have given life two names heaven and hell. Heaven for their life and hell for the life of writers and poets. And it said that once it was bitter cold in heaven. People shivered with the cold. So they thought that in hell there is fire heat and fire, so why not ask for a little fire from hell. But their request was turned down. The answer came, they had no extra fire. People who came here bring their own fires with them. And that fire burns in the heart of all poets and writers and from which no other can get warmth. To get that warmth one has to be a poet or a writer.

And I said that in this period of negative forces the fire of consciousness still burns, and we have all gathered to give a welcome to the fire that burns in Fakhar Zaman with the fires burning inside us all.

This was the meeting with Fakhar Zaman of three days from which the burning sparks will light the darkness of the negative forces.

Sometimes one just sits and wonders at the political conditions that change overnight. I had already written this article on Fakhar Zaman when suddenly on 15th January I got a phone call from Fakhar from Ashoka Hotel saying that today he has come as a representative of his new government at the invitation of the Government of India.

The Martenitza

TODAY my lord was watering the plants straight from the sky....

It had been drizzling since morning. Each bud and leaf in my home had been washed clean. In the blazing hot days when I used to spray the plants, my eyes always gazed at the tops of the lemon, pomegranate, peach, magnolia, *champak* and temple flower trees that I could not wash. And I would gaze intently at the sky – “Dear my Lord! Please shower straight from the skies, see how dusty and grimy all these leaves and branches are....”

It was late afternoon. My mind was fresh like the buds and leaves around. I opened the table drawer and took out the roll of silken white and red threads which the Bulgarian poet, Lyubomir Levchev, had sent me along with a letter. “Amrita! This signifies the beginning of spring. It is customary for us Bulgarians to send the white and red silken thread to friends. Women attach this to their wrists as bracelets and men to their armour, until the snow melts and the first bird of spring flies high in the sky. Afterwards, it is fastened to a blossoming branch close to the house.... On this auspicious occasion, dear friend, I am sending you this martenitza with my best wishes....”

The same day, I tied two threads to my bougainvillea creeper and carefully kept the rest away, with the thought that I would bind my next book with these, when it comes from the press. And that very day, I wrote to Levchev that the only tools that poets and writers have are their pens and books. That is why I

have added something new to this tradition – such threads should be tied to new books, with a wish that all creative work be to the delight and joy of us all, by being instrumental in bringing about peace and friendship in the world.

And this was the day I had brought my book of poems published in Norway. Masood Munnavar, a poet from Pakistan, had translated the poems into Urdu and arranged the publication of this book in Norway. And when I tied the book with Bulgarian martenitza, another face of spring appeared before my eyes – freedom for each country and peace and friendship among all.

Exactly at five-thirty, the Bulgarian Ambassador, Mr. Tochev, came to my home and announced: “We are celebrating the 40th anniversary of our Freedom Day. I have come to deliver to you a medal from the President of our country along with greetings from him, as a token of your friendship with our country.”

The new face of spring that was coming up in my imagination came embodied in the form of that medal – friendship and peace among all countries.

At that moment, the history of the Bulgarian people who fought for their freedom came to my mind. And out of the blood-drenched pages of Bulgarian history rose the face of one. Hristo Botev, who had led a band of 128 men to end Turkish rule and who had written to his beloved.

*Sing to me, my love, in harsh and high notes
How youth gets wasted in despair and dreams flow away
How broken women wail, and orphans cry.*

Hristo Botev was barely 28 when, in July 1868, the Turkish invaders axed him.

And I recalled the day I visited his native village, when the entire village was paying homage to the place he had lived in. Garlands in hand, people were reciting his poems and offering flowers to his memory.

And another blood-stained page from Bulgarian history smiled proudly. Geomilev's voice it was that came to my ears:

Come on, Comrades! Let us cast our ropes up to the skies!

And lasso to our door God's own Paradise

And tighten the noose down to Earth where our way lies....

Geomilev was executed by the oppressors in 1925. But the ropes he cast up in the skies were there. Freedom had been brought. They were celebrating the 40th anniversary.

And Nikola Vaptsarov's voice, too, turned over the blood-drenched page of Bulgarian history. In my ears rang the clear voice: "No bullet has yet been made that can kill my faith." Vaptsarov was also shot dead by the Nazis on 23 July 1942. And I thought: "They had put an end to his body – not his faith. And to me, the celebration was really the anniversary of his faith...."

There is a photograph near a table lamp in my room. In the photograph, Indira Gandhi is bestowing upon me the D.Litt. at Shantiniketan – 17 December 1983. Mr. Tochev, silently looking at it, said, "On October 26, I had the honour of meeting her... I hadn't the remotest thought that it would be the last, just five days before that fateful day – 31 October. We of the Diplomatic Corps are not supposed to be emotional but, when I later visited the same house as a memorial, tears came to my eyes."

And I, too, recalled the days of our freedom struggle. Ultimately, when freedom dawned and our tree of freedom blossomed. And then... Indiraji's assassination, countless other innocent people murdered... and violence all around....

I felt painfully dazed – what sort of fall has encroached into our spring?

Mr. Tochev sensed my sadness and commented, "Why do the big powers play such horrible games, arming the youth of other countries and then pretending sympathy?"

Mr. Tochev has just left, but the medal and my book, with the white and red silken thread, is still there on my table, and darkness is descending in my room.

And now suddenly, the thought of the shining rays of tomorrow's sun comes to my mind. I should tie the silken threads on the arms of terrorists and say: "Friends! You are the flowers of our soil... the flowers carry fragrance, not guns and bullets.... Please tie these threads on the branches of our tree of democracy to protect the spring of independence."

A Cry from the Depth

The Madhav Temple

I was told that there was a temple not far away when you've got down the Pua Makka hill – Madhav Temple, where Hindus and Muslims joined to offer prayers and ask for the deity's blessings.

The temple was at such a high spot as could be reached only by climbing a forbidding flight of steps. My aching knee discreetly muffled its cry because even if it let it out, it knew that my ears would refuse to hear it.

On the first step itself I got the intimation that I'll have to go in for a garland of Tulsi leaves – this was Vishnu temple and Vishnu had great charm for Tulsi. As an expression of my regard for Vishnu's love for Tulsi, I bought the required garland. But when I reached the last step, I found a mini basket placed before me. The garland was supposed to be placed in the basket along with a few rupees as an offering. I rubbed my eyes in wonder as to why currency was needed to certify the garland as fit.

The time was early warring of afternoon, not exactly the time for worship and prayers. Hence I was not destined to experience the sight of the joint worship of Hindus and Muslims. But to simulate the sight, I faithfully obeyed the commands of the priest and went on placing the currency at the spots indicated. I put him an audacious question if all the Hindus and Muslims too recited before the divine images all the mantras which he was asking me

to repeat after him.

A smile descended on the lips of the priest who informed me that only Hindus are certified to come near the images. Muslims have to keep standing outside near the temple threshold. This gave me an intimation that there were two different paths – one for the Hindus that led upto the images and the other for the Muslims which ended up at the rather huge threshold that seemed drawn like a Lakshman Rekha, forbidding them to go any further.

I saw a cave-like structure built in the heart of the temple. I imagined that its dark interior must be symbolic of the human soul's darkness where the formless assumes a form. The form, glowing in the light of the earthen lamps, comforting the eyes, represented a certain power of the inner soul. But who, pray, who will tell me when, why and how all these outer walls and thresholds were built to divide this indivisible power of the human soul. And, when, why and how the Lakshman Rekha which used to exist for the security of the feet, became an interruption between the feet and security.

But I know it full well that the answer lies neither with any mantra nor with any temple today. So I found that the temple was silence, all silence like I was and so was the meaning of every mantra.

Vaishnav Math

It was the morning of February 4....

The Vaishnav Math of the Barpetta town of Assam was confronting me. And, what I saw was about a hundred women standing in the parikrama, the pathway around the sanctum sanctorum of the Math....

I had never known this town nor this Math. However, my eyes, strangely, seemed to assure me that the sight of a hundred white-clad women was a part of my experience and memory....

Yes! It was exactly the same sight which my eyes had experienced in a dream in 1987.... But today my Assamese friend, Indira Goswami, was with me, informing me that these women

lived in the parikrama itself. About 500 years ago when this building first saw the light of the day, some households started serving the sacred place and till today, generation after generation, they have been committing their service to the Math. Now a sort of township has sprung around it and these women are in perpetual service of the Math. The dream I had in 1987 filled my eyes. I enquired from India if they daily recited Lord Krishna's Gita there.

Indira pointed out to me a spot built in the midst of the parikrama where a light had been burning for the past 500 years by the side of the Gita which occupied the spot exclusively. She told me that the Gita was recited everyday but no woman was allowed to go near the burning light. All women had to sit within the parikrama to listen to the recitation.

"How do you mean?" asked I in rather confused puzzlement. "Is the area of light forbiddin to women?" "Yes", came the reply. And, as if spelling out the code of conduct, Indira affirmed that women were not to be admitted to the area.

In anguish I looked at the faces of the women standing in the parikrama: clad in white dhoties they looked like wrappings of withered, faded flowers.

I was an official guest of the Assemese government and had security guards around me. Smelling my "status", the priest came and greeted me. He got opened the door and showed me from a distance the light that had been burning without interruption for 500 years.

Smiling, I asked the priest how it was that Krishna adorned the inside of the room without the accompaniment of Radha. Radha is the Super-Consciousness of Krishna, how could Krishna exist without Super-Consciousness?

His reply was rather simple: Krishna alone has a place in our worship, not Radha.

I looked at the distant white and morose dhotis in the parikrama and felt an urge to cry out: Krishna is the name for the acceptance of life, not for the denial of life.

This was a silent cry that perched only on my lips and on no

nother woman's.

I am not sure how my dream had unfurled before me the mysterious scene in which each of the several women listening to the speaker, commenting on the Gita, had got up one by one to announce to him that she was Krishna's mother. Today exactly the same scene was before my eyes but all the women were silent – defeated, exhausted and silent!

In my dream when each women had got up to announce that she was the mother of Krishna, the dream speaker had asserted that none except Devki or Yadhodhara who had nursed and nurtured him was Krishna's mother. Krishna had appeared in person at that moment to contradict the speaker and had said: "These women are absolutely right; each one of them is my mother indeed! Each of them has given birth to me out of her consciousness her thought...."

Thoroughly infected by my dream, I stared at the burning light. It was the intensity of my feeling that made me wish that Krishna should appear from within the light to call "Mother!" to the inner mother of all those women who had been standing in the parikrama year after year for 500 years.

But the happening in my dream was not to be on the floor of the Math....

Nor do I know when it will be....

But I do know that my dream was not in vain. The happening will come about but only when there arises a cry from the depth of the women standing in the parikrama for the past 500 years. But, as yet, their consciousness, like the dust on the floor of the Math, was lying at their feet.

Sunshine and Shadows

WHEN a mother caresses the back of her child and the child's eyes become heavy with sleep and then god alone knows the numerous visions that creep into the mother's eyes. The inner voice breaks out on the lips of the mother into a fervent prayer

*I kiss your little feet
and beg for your well being.*

The history of these little songs from the mother blooming lips is spread to the thorn sprouted by the social and political conditions. Whose pains the mother has felt but the child has yet to experience.

The dark skinned people have tolerated quite a lot from the white skinned race. And how the word "life" has become a forbidden fruit for them. And sitting in the shadow of this fear an African mother sings a lullaby to her child.

*On the black forehead of my little one the black hair plays
No one knows how many dreams of mine break.*

When the oppressed take up arms to seek justice. And when life doesn't give way then on the frightened lips of the mother a fervent prayer comes for the sleeping child on the cot-the lips quiver—

I give you the blessing of youth to your childhood.

After giving the blessings I become scared.

You are a piece of sunshine and I am shadow full of blots.

Why you like a dream of a vision come to my womb.

I have no roof, no walls where to hide you.

And where you play that house from where shall I get.

The life of “gadia lohar” (wandering blacksmiths) is connected to the period of history pertaining to the defeat of Rajputs by the invasion of Akbar and the hurt pride that burnt inside them. When Rana Pratap regrouped the scattered people and the blacksmith joined him to make weapons. These very people dispersed after Rana Pratap’s death. And till today they are wandering. And when the furnaces glow with fire to make small arms or to sharpen small knives and scissors then a fierce pain burns in their veins.

In their admist if a woman is pregnant she sings for her unborn child.

Oh dear! why have come to my womb.

Shall I imagine about your features

I desire you to be born with the face of Rana-Pratap.

But I know, it will not happen.

No one can be Rana Pratap.

So I say, why have you come to my womb.

I still say you shouldn't take birth.

If you take birth, then don't suck my milk.

If you suckle my breast don't grow into a youth.

If you become a youth my son

Then keep the honour of the milk you had

And dig from the earth of Chittor our lost pride.

Then our ancestors will bless me.

For giving birth to a son of the soil.

Kripal Kazak a story writer when young fell enamoured by a maiden Surji, belonging to the wandering tribe “gadia lohar”. He was so fascinated that he left home and joined them. He knew these people never allowed any outsider to enter their circle. But

somehow by entreating the head of the tribe for years he fanned the fire of the furnace. And from afar gazed at Surji. Surji he never got but Kazak learned the dialect of the tribe. When he became a writer he penned the history of the tribe. On meeting him he told me, "Amritaji, this tribe has five oaths, which Rana Pratap had asked them to take and they till today are observed. One, they will never return to Chittor that as defeated ones. The second oath was that they will not keep a rope to take water out of the well with them. This was done because those days all the wells had been poisoned by the enemy. Rana Pratap had asked them to take this oath so that people would not by mistake drink the water. The third oath was that they will keep their cots upside down; so that they don't feel settled and live a comfortable life, forgetting the past. The fourth asked them not to light a lamp in the night. So that they might not be spotted by the enemy. And the fifth asked them not to stay in permanent houses, so that they may not forget the past, while living in comfort.

These people even today follow the five oaths and have added another two of their own. First no man and woman will marry out of their tribe and secondly they will evolve a secret language so that outsider cannot follow what they say.

I asked Kazak, "These new oaths must have hampered your association with Surji and which must have sealed your lips. But in these three years you must have learnt their secret language? Tell me does the woman have the liberty to marry of her own free will."

He said, "Yes, Amritaji they have the liberty. There is a special ritual called "Patra" in which the father of the marriageable girl sits on a "Patra" and takes his bath. He calls the people of the tribe and asks his daughter to get a pair of shoes. When the girl brings the pair of shoes and the shoe points towards her, then it is understood that she had found a man of her choice. And hence the father doesn't have to go to any other tribe in search of a bridegroom. But when the shoe points outward it is a sign that the father can go and search for a bridegroom.

I asked Kazak what happens if the man is not liked by the

parents?

Kazak said, "Amritaji, whatever happens they have to accept the choice. Then they prepare "ghungani" mixture of wheat and brown sugar. And while fresh they send this preparation to the other tribe. Immediately afterwards the man the girl has chosen, comes and ties his scarf to the cart belonging to the girls parent. Then this marriage has to be carried out.

He continued and told, "after the marriage the most interesting ritual is the "Bhundi roti" when meat is cooked and wine is brought out. The girl invites all her boy friends who had wooed her before her marriage. This ritual is noted by the absence of the parents. They only observe from afar. The girl distributes the food by her own hands, to all her previous lovers. This meaning of this ritual is that she has selected her man and now onwards she will have no relationship with any other.

I asked suppose she had many friends, then doesn't the husband feel jealous of her previous lovers?

"No, Amritaji, its just the opposite." Said Kazak. "If the friends are few the husband thinks what kind of a girl is she. Didn't she have many friends who admired her. He laughed and said, "They believe that a woman's body is symbolically divided into three parts. The region from the toes to the waist is reserved for the husband. From the waist to her chin is the region belonging to her child And from the chin to the head is for the profession she carries out. The fact is that the man looks after the furnaces and the knives and scissors they make. The women have to go and sell from door to door, in the process they have to talk to strangers, barter on price and in the process cut jokes. Thats why the area from the chin above is considered for the profession.

Considering the song the pregnant woman sings for her unborn child I asked, "This desire to have a child like Rana Pratap in the psyche of every woman, does the tribe help her in achieving the same."

"When married girl wears a shirt embroidered with small round mirrors. The tribe observes that this woman wants to

become a mother. At that time the husband is relieved from the hard work of attending the furnace. And he is given a special diet of almonds, butter and poppy seeds. The woman lets loose her hair and she walks like a fairy. After a couple of months when she becomes pregnant she again braids her hair. Then the whole tribe celebrates the occasion with many types of fried food. And like the man, she too is now put on a special diet and a nice area in the cart is made available for her to rest. And the most strange and important fact is that when she is about to deliver, the help of a midwife is not availed. She had to deliver her baby all by herself hidden behind some bush. She is forbidden to cry out in pain, she has to bear it silently. If her cry is heard, then she loses all her respect in the tribe considering that she is not capable of giving birth to a strong and healthy child. 'The dream is to have another Rana Pratap who can bring back the lost pride.'

The Seven Questions Independence Asked Us

THERE is an edifying story from the *Mahabharata*. The Pandavas had almost completed the stipulated period of their exile when one day Yudhishtir, tormented by thirst, sent his younger brother Nakula in search of water. The young Nakula found a pool but before he could take water, a disembodied voice warned him that he should answer a few questions before his thirst could be quenched. Nakula paid no heed to the voice, touched the water and fell unconscious. Sahadeva, Bhima and Arjuna repeated the same mistake and fell down in a swoon, as if dead. Finally, Yudhishtir arrived and, recognising the voice of the Yaksha of the pool, answered all its questions satisfactorily. His words are highly ennobling nuggets of wisdom.

Similarly, when after centuries of slavery and degradation we entered the Independence era, the yaksha of independence asked us seven questions. We had suffered for so long and so many of us had made sacrifices that we were burning with the desire to embrace independence. In our haste and ardour we didn't bother to answer the questions.

- Who is the one who knows the meaning of the word 'freedom'?

- Who is worthy of enjoying Independence?
- Is there a connection between freedom and state power?
- Is temporal power related to the power of inner Being?
- Can freedom be given and received like alms?
- Can freedom be robbed or snatched away?
- Can freedom be established and stabilized without the strength of moral character?

Most of our present ills arose because we never really faced these tough questions.

The five Pandavas are like our five senses. If four fail, the fifth one has to be up to the task. They can also be compared to five layers of consciousness, then Yudhishtir is the superconsciousness. The answers coming from, and decisions made at, a higher level of consciousness are always right. One of the questions the yaksha asked was: Where is the sun honoured and when is it dishonoured? Yudhishtir's reply was: In man's rectitude is it honoured. Yes; I'd like to see the sun honoured in my country. I'm waiting for the day.

In the ultimate analysis the crisis in our society is a crisis of values. Commercialisation has become our bane. After religion it is the turn of culture to be exploited for crass commercialisation.

It will be foolish to apportion blame on the ruling party or the opposition or the intellectual elite. Criticism of the leaders is misplaced. Leaders are chosen by the people and so represent them. They are a mere reflection of the collective consciousness of the people. It is in this sense the saying "people get the government they deserve" should be understood.

I'm saddened when I think about the world of difference between what India could have been and what India actually has become. Ours is such a rich inheritance and we have all but forgotten it. In the modern era we could have fused science and spirituality to create the best ever civilisation. I am reminded of a recent incident. The wife of the governor of Ohio in America came to visit me and asked a very provocative question: "You are fully aware of India's terrible problems – population, poverty,

superstition, still you are able to feel proud of your country, how?" I pondered over the question. No, it was not 'my country – right or wrong'. I love India because there is something special about its soil, its soul. I quoted to my august guest a verse from *Rig Veda*. Ostensibly it is about man-woman relationship and can be paraphrased something like this: "In the morning glow when she meets the sun, her lover, she should beautify herself and how. Knowledge should be the 'kajal' in her eyes and poetry the bouquet of flowers in her hands. And when the two lovers unite, the sages and *devas* will come to perform the wedding ceremonies. An ennobling vision is the pillow on which the couple should put their heads to rest and freedom the bed where the marriage should be consummated."

Now tell me in which other country did they ever reach this exalted level – 'freedom the bed', etc. Yes, I love India for the spiritual heights it had touched. I love that fragrance of life which permeated the country. Nobody can snatch away that fragrance from me.

A total transformation is the need of the hour. Making cosmetic changes in the structure here and there won't lead us anywhere. The structure is the body of the system which is created by the values springing from the collective consciousness. Collective consciousness is the sum total of individual consciousness. So the ball is in the court of you and me. We are passing through a phase in which negative values have usurped the positive ones. We have to turn the cycle.

The Great Conspiracy

I don't know who conspired first to break the direction of the evolution of thought and bring about the confrontation between physical strength and between the intellectual capacities of two persons. To make them compete against each other was a terrible conspiracy. This conspiracy eclipsed the beauty of the development of the mind and body.

And today the whole world of ours – from games to war-games – has been cursed by this competition.

But here I will speak about the eclipsed intellectual capability which for years has been labelled as *shastrarth*. (debate).

The little knowledge that the few acquired from the ocean of knowledge was not to be pitted one against the other. Each achievement was meant to mingle with the others for furthering the process of evolution. Our literary gathering and discourses could be the convergence of many streams of thought. But it was a terrible conspiracy which turned it all into *shastrarth*.

The small streams of knowledge were meant to come together to form a vast flowing river. But when its strong current was impeded by competitive mental blocks, the streams dried up.

The soul of the streams began to shrink.

Victory turned egoistic and defeat became anger.

The ego is like a hot searing fire whose heat dries up the soul. Anger too is like a fire which chars every achievement to ash. To

appear nice in the eyes of time the ugly conspiracy coined a graceful word, *shastrarth*. There are several examples which are a part of our history. No historian can give voice to the agony of the defeated one, but the *kali vardaten* (black incidents) are there in front of us from history.

It was the ninth Bikram century when Kumaril was born into a scholarly family, the Banbhats. When he had acquired the knowledge of the Vedas and many other *shastras*, he became a scholar of *Mimamsa Darshan*. His fame spread all over the land.

At the same time, amongst the many *Bodh bhikshus* from Sarnath, there was a great scholar who had spent many years at Nalanda, the great seat of learning.

When a debate was arranged between the two great scholars, the *Bodh bhikshu* was defeated by Kumaril's power of logic. The sad aftermath of the debate was that the *Bodh bhikshu* committed suicide.

While Kumaril's admirers celebrated his victory, he himself was sad. The last words of the *bhikshu* echoes in his ears: "I have lost the debate, but you would have understand my way of thinking if only you had spent and lived a few years in Nalanda like me."

Kumaril was from a very rich family. He personally owned 1000 horses and 500 elephants. He donated all his wealth to the *vidyapeeth* of *Pratisthanpur* and went away to Nalanda as a *Bodh bhikshu*. Within the discipline of the university he studied the *Bodh granths*.

Two years later he turned into a *Bodh* scholar of great eminence. As was the custom in Nalanda every year, he was honoured for being the best student. There was also a prince who was studying at Nalanda at the same time and who considered that honour to be his birthright. When in a debate he lost to Kumaril he became revengeful. The university ran on the taxes of 200 villages, which the king donated. This sustained 12,000 *bhikshus*. The management was in the hands of the prince who was defeated by Kumaril in each and every debate.

One day a *Bodh bhikshu* who was a foreigner condemned the

Vedas to such an extent that tears came to Kumaril's eyes. This was the opportunity the prince was waiting for. Kumaril was labelled a traitor because, it was said, he was studying their *granth*s to defeat their very own philosophy. Kumaril was condemned to death. *Kulpati*, the Vice-Chancellor, was helpless because the whole university depended upon the grants given by the king.

It was providence that Kumaril escaped death, but it was a known fact that he was pushed from the ninth floor of the university building.

Though Kumaril escaped with only an injured left eye, the prince could not swallow the fact that Kumaril didn't die. So he demanded that Kumaril's face should be painted black and that he should be put astride a donkey and banished from Nalanda.

Of course, there were many *Bodhs* who considered that such an act would be a blemish on the *Bodh Dharma*, but the prince threatened all who were not in agreement. And in front of the eyes of the disheartened people, Kumaril's face was blackened and he was put astride a donkey and banished forever from Nalanda.

Another incident was a debate between *Shankara* (*Adi Shankaracharya*) and *Mandan Mishr* which was arranged in the palace of Mandan Mishr, built on the banks of the Narmada. The consequences of losing the debate were that Mandan Mishr would leave all his worldly wealth and become a *sanyasi* and if Shankara lost he would no more remain a *sanyasi* but would enter *grihasta ashram*. Mandan Mishr lost the debate, so he left all his wealth and family to become a *sanyasi*.

Quoting another incident: a beautiful, scholarly lady named Prabha from the *vidyapeeth* of *Prathisthanpur* entered into a debate with Bharahmanand a *Bodh bhikshu*. In the debate the *Bodh bhikshu* lost, and to avenge his defeat he became the disciple of *Krakach*, who was a famous tantrik. The *Bodh bhikshu* became famous as *Ugrabhairav*. He considered all the scholar sadhus his enemies.

Adi Shankaracharyas' growing popularity and the adulation shown by the people only flamed the fire of revenge in Ug-

rabhairav. So he started a *havan* with *tantrik vidhi*, with mustard seeds and different types of wines, then with *gugal* and *red sandalwood*, then *kaajal*. He continued with the blood of many birds and animals. He ate in plenty, drank his fill and took an oath: "I shall appease goddess Kali with the blood offering of our foremost scholar, Shankaracharya". Somehow Prabha came to know about this. She conveyed the news to Bharti the ruler, who sent a trustworthy bodyguard named Ramdas for the protection of Shankaracharya. It was a dark moonless night of March. Shankaracharya was in *smadhi*. At that moment Ramdas saw Ugrabhairavi coming towards him with a naked sword in his hand. He quickly woke up Padampada, a disciple of Shankaracharya. When Ugra attacked Shankaracharya, Ramdas blunted the attack with his iron staff. The falling sword cut Shankaracharya's shoulder, which bled, but he survived.

Another time when Shankaracharya was travelling towards Kailash Parbat he spent a night in a *Bodh ashram* which was located beyond Kathmandu. A Tibetan prince came to meet him and narrated a sad tale. The *bhikshus* of this place invited the great scholar *Kamalsheel* from Nalanda and arranged a debate which went on for many days. The *bhikshus* ultimately lost. To revenge their defeat they slew Kamalsheel in his sleep.

The above incidents are taken from the book *Shankaracharya* by Dr. Dashrath Ojha.

In our mythology, it says that egocentric debates started from the *devatas* (gods). To belittle the power of *Indra*, the firegod *Agni* said: "I am all powerful. If I want I can turn the whole universe into ash".

To belittle the power of the *Agni*, *Som* (god of water) said: "Without me nothing can grow on this earth."

And to belittle *Som*, *Vayu* (the god of the wind) said: "Without me no man can breathe. When I move, the breath moves, when I stop the breath stops.

To give a judgement on this egocentric display of power in debate, *Brahma* invited *Vishnu*. *Vishnu* invited *Shiva*. And he in turn invited *Adi Shakti* (the supreme power).

The supreme power placed a straw before them all. The god of fire couldn't burn it. The god of water couldn't wash it away. The god of air couldn't blow it away. And Indra couldn't break it with his weapons.

It is said *Adi Shakti* smiled. And she said: "Even the smallest particle of knowledge is precious. It's aim is not to come to loggerheads. It's aim is to enjoin supreme knowledge."

Alphabets of the Universe

ON the 14th of March at midnight, my eyes were filled with a strange vision. I saw a big expanse of space where innumerable women are sitting. All wear white. Before them, stands Lord Krishna. Looking at him is a learned-looking person, giving a spiritual talk. When he speaks about the mother who gave birth to Lord Krishna, some women suddenly stand up. Each and every one of them says with great authority: "I am Krishna's mother". Surprised, the speaker looks at the women and, like the speaker, I look too. Lord Krishna smiles and says: "They are speaking the truth, their mind has given me birth...."

For a few days I was wrapped in the dream. I could find no reason for having this dream. A man is called a worshipper of gods and goddesses because of certain reasons. But within those parameters I had never worshipped an idol. So troubled, one day I told my friend C.B. Satpathy, who has a deep knowledge about Sanskrit, ancient books and astrology about my dream.

After listening to me he said – "One finds an example in history in the Treta Yug when Shri Rama was leaving the throne to go into the forest. The *rishis* of the forest wanted to have an audience and also wanted to accompany him. At that moment Shri Rama said that when he would appear in the Dwapar period as Krishna on the earth, then you all will be my companions as *gopis*. So the *gopis* of the Krishna era were in fact the *rishis* of the Rama era. Seems that the *rishis* have appeared in your dream

Prose

as *gopis*....”

Laughing, I asked – “According to the myth, the *gopis* were companions of Krishna and not his mothers; why did I see those *gopis* in the form of mothers?”

Satpathy said – “What you heard from Krishna’s own mouth in the dream was that they were all his mothers because their mind had given birth to him. So if we forget the ancient myth about the *gopis* and go deeply into the dream, then the pointer is towards the story in the Treta Yuga, when the *rishis* in the forest wanted to accompany Shri Rama. And again the Dwapar Yuga the *rishis* become *gopis* and become the symbol of having given birth to Krishna from within their mind.

Satpathy’s explanation had won over the mind but I was mystified over why I had not heard about the Puranic tale. Again, how had the thread of my dream got joined with it? I asked – “Is there a mention of the number of *rishis*?”

He said – “Yes, one finds it. The number of *rishis* was said to be about sixteen thousand and that of the *gopis* also at sixteen thousand....”

I suddenly remembered the time when Shri Krishna Dutt entered samadhi and was explaining the Puranas and Vedas and the science behind the Puranic stories and the meaning of symbols. I remembered having heard from his own mouth that the sixteen thousand *gopis* were in fact the sixteen thousand *richas* of the Rig Veda. Another name for a *richa* is *gopika*....

And I found my dream had some depth. These *richas* of the Rig Veda in some age were called *rishis* and in another *gopis*. And they had left behind their impression in my dream, as the basis for man’s creative ability, which in turn gives birth to each and every god and goddess.

I had written this dream in my diary, and had nearly forgotten it, when today I felt its full impact as I read Colin Wilson’s analysis: “There is a connection between creativity and psychic sensitivity. The creative person is concerned with taking the powers of the subconscious mind”.

In the subconscious mind the experience of years and ages is stored. Sometimes only in creative moments does one find the

touch of the supernatural, and sometimes in dreams.

I felt may be this is the inner journey, the journey which we have forgotten, about which Beethoven had said with exasperation – “Man is not small but he is bloody lazy”.

The same words of Beethoven were in my mind and my subconscious mind had pointed a finger towards that state through which my whole country is passing – senseless killings – and through which our whole world is passing – the danger of a nuclear holocaust.

Remembered what Doctor Foster had said in reference to the birth of the universe, meaning man – “The essential nature of matter is that the atoms are alphabets of the universe and the compounds are words; the molecules of the substance are rather a long sentence and the whole look trying to say something is man”.

And the bloodshed today? I felt it is a vulgar abuse. And instead of divine thoughts man has filled the blank pages of the universe with vulgar abuses.

The afternoon's mail has just come and as usual my Bulgarian friend has sent me a Martenitza, which is a bunch of white and red threads. It is an ancient and beautiful Bulgarian tradition in which these threads are sent to friends in anticipation of spring. Those who receive then, in turn, have to tie them around the trees on which the flowers of spring will bloom....

And today like every year my heart became emotional. Shall I tie these threads around the hands of my country's youth, so that instead of making the country desolate and barren they will help in making it green? And some of these threads I feel like tying around the arms of the superpowers so that instead of using atoms of destruction they use it for the prosperity of the world. There are two types of journeys – one that is within, which the subconscious takes, and the outward journey which the conscious mind makes. Looks as if my dream was an inner journey, and when awake my eyes see an outward journey.

There are no destinations in sight. But I know, that the journey is my fate. And to these paths have I dedicated my feet. And from these paths have I to pick the atoms which are the alphabets of the universe.

My Sixteenth Year

CAME my sixteenth year – like a stranger. Inside me, there was an awareness I could not explain.

Except for Father, there was no one else in our house. He wrote away and sometimes would keep at his work all through the night and sleep during the day. Had mother been alive, my sixteenth year would have been different, it would have come like a friend, a near relative.... But without Mother, there was a great deal missing from my life. To shield me from outside influences, Father thought it right that I should have no familiarity with anyone: not with any girl from school nor with any boy from the neighbourhood.

Like a thief, came my sixteenth year, stealthily like a prowler in the night, stealing in through the open window at the head of my bed....

Our house was full of books. Most of them were on religion, about *rishis* and about meditation. There were a few books of history but into these too, *apsaras* sometimes intruded – like Menaka or Urvashi, out to seduce the meditating *rishis*. It was reading them that my sixteenth year broke through the age of my innocence....

Every *apsara* disturbing the meditations of a *rishi* was, mythologically speaking, the commissary of Lord Indra. My sixteenth year must also have been Lord Indra's work, invading the

purity of my childhood. It was now that I began to write poetry, and on every poem I wrote, I carried the cross of forbidden desires. Just as the *rishis* became restless as each *apsara* appeared, so my rebellious thoughts pursued me, giving me no peace....

And yet that year established no kinship with me. It was a clandestine relationship. Like me, it was scared of Father. As it stood away from me behind a door, every poem I wrote I tore to bits and appeared before father, an innocent, dutiful child.

Not that he objected to my writing poetry. He had himself given me my first lessons in metrical composition. But what he expected from me was religious verse, orthodox and conventional in style.

That was how my sixteenth year came and went. Nothing very significant happened. Yet life took on a different meaning. It was the beginning of the uneven road of life with all its hairpin bends, its ups and downs. It was also the beginning of curiosity. I questioned parental authority, I questioned the value of doing my work at school by rote. I questioned what had been preached to me and I questioned the entire stratified social scheme. What I had so far learnt was like a straitjacket that gives way at the seams as the body grows. I was thirsty for life. I wanted living contact with those stars I had been taught to worship from afar. What I got instead was advice and constraint which only fed my rebellion.

I suppose everyone goes through this phase. But it happened to me with three times greater impact. First, there was the drabness of middle-class morality; then the dosage of "don'ts" thrust down my throat which I somehow felt I would have been spared, had my mother been alive. There was the overbearing presence of my father, a man of religion. Poor father. He wanted me to be an obedient, self-effacing daughter and here was I in my sixteenth year bearing my cross like the pang of an unfulfilled love. I was sixteen and the memory creeps into every phase of my life....

I caught its spirit—again and again. At the time of the partition of the country in 1947, when all social, political and religious

values came crashing down like glass smashed into smithereens under the feet of people in flight....Those crushed pieces of glass bruised my soul and my limbs bled. I wrote my hymns for the suffering of those who were abducted and raped. The passion of those monstrous times has been with me since, like some consuming fire—when I wrote later of a beloved's face; of the aggressors from neighbouring countries; of the crime of the long Vietnamese night, or, at one stage, of the helpless Czechs.... In the haunting image of beauty and in the anger at wrong and cruelty, my sixteenth year stretches on and on....

I thank the fates that conspired to break through the years of my innocence. That conspiracy relates not only to that one year alone but to the whole of my life.

Each thought of mine year after year, intrudes upon those innocent years. I pity the patience and resignation of those who come to terms with wrong, I am happy I have not had the solace of peace as I go alone on my restless quest...except, perhaps, that I have acquired since, the sense to discern. And like in my sixteenth year, I do not negotiate my walls by stealth. I do not avoid confrontation. As I begin my fiftieth year my feelings have the same intensity. Even now, everything around me seems to constrict the soul just as the clothes one grows out of during adolescence. The lips are parched with the thirst for life; desire comes back to stretch the hand and touch the stars. Wherever in the world a wrong is done, I continue to feel a deep sense of outrage. .

A Shadow

A deep dark shadow walked along my side for as long as I can remember. It gradually came on me that much was layered into it: the face of my ideal lover, and mine, that I imagined growing wiser, stronger, more mature. The layer deepest down was of the freedom of my own and other lands.

Whatever I wrote was inspired by this shadow, to which I gave flesh and blood, a vague mass in which I sought to reveal

something luminous in quality.

Was this out of a longing to embody God – a God with so many faces? The moments of my life expand to reveal beautiful concepts and forms.... Those moments were painful, like bird-song in the morning, heard one moment, lost the next. I remember writing once, “I have many contemporaries, only I am not contemporaneous.”

It was well if someone gave ear to my songs. I had no right to claim it.

I was yet a child when I heard those myriad voices of hate and abuse. There were flags of so many denominations and so many flagstuffs on which they fluttered. They thought I too wanted to fly one of my own. I wanted to cry out of them all, “My friends, have no illusions. You’re welcome to your faiths and your flags. I want nothing.” But did anyone care? Would a time come when they would hear? Not when it came to my own language. This is as true today as it was thirty years ago.

This was my first painful experience. I did not know it would last a lifetime.

Woman in Me

In the totality of my self as a writer, the woman in me has had only a secondary role to play. So often have I nudged myself into an awareness of the woman in me. The writer’s role is obvious. But the existence of that other being have I increasingly discovered through my creative works.

When she came to life, three distinct incidents come to mind. Paradoxically again, there was no possibility of finding a place for her as she exists in the world of creativity. This fact I can realize and assess since the distance of years alone can make possible such a vision.

The first time was when I was twenty-five years of age. I had no child until then. Very often I dreamt of one: a fair face with finely chiselled features looking into my eyes. I began to recognize it after its repeated appearances. I used to dream of it speak-

ing to me – so I began to recognize the voice as well. In one of these dreams I was watering plants. From one of the pots, instead of a flower, the face would suddenly spring up. Aghast, I would ask: “Where were you?” “Right here!” He would break out into laughter with the reply. And I would hurriedly lift the little one from the pot.

But when I would wake up, I would find myself all alone – a woman in name, who, if she could not become a mother, could find no meaning at all in existence....

The second time was when Sahir had turned up with a fever. He had racking pain all over and was finding it particularly difficult to breathe. I rubbed Vicks on his throat and chest – in fact I went on and on, as if I could spend the rest of my life doing it. The mere contact had magnetically rendered me into a mere woman, with no need at all for paper or pen.

The third time the woman in me came to the forefront was when Imroz sat once, working in his studio. On completion of the canvas, he dipped the brush into the red paint and with the tip of it, dabbed a mark on my forehead.

This secondary role as a woman, however, takes up no quarrels with my main being as a writer. Rather, the woman in me has in a disciplined manner learnt to accept that secondary role. Only three times over the years did she wish to assert herself and the writer move aside to make way for her.

On One Palm Henna —on the Other Blisters

THIS book “*The Revenue Stamp*” was printed in 1976 in Punjabi. In 1977 the Hindi and English versions were published. On 3rd September a reader had sent me a newspaper clipping, which contained a protest to the Punjab government to ban this book. This case dragged on for months. I had no idea about who handled this file but what I came to know from a reliable source was that the complaint was made at the instigation of one of my contemporaries, who made them raise this question that the book hurting religious sentiments.

I breathed for many months the air that was filled with sparks but then the time came when the fireball vanished into the air.

And to offset the earlier tension I received a letter from Indiraji dated 11th April 1979, regarding this book.

12 Willingdon Crescent
New Delhi - 110011

11th April 1979

Dear Amritaji,

It needed quite a search before I could locate your book – Maneka had borrowed it – and I read it at one go that same night.

It is moving, not for what it says but because of the sensitivity which comes through so vividly. It is *you* and yet there is something universal. Patterns are different but the essence of dreams and of struggles exist in some measure in all humans. Most people bury their real selves in some unfathomable depth of their being and just skim the surface of life. It is the privilege of the artist and the poet to be more poignantly aware.

Yours sincerely

Indira Gandhi

P.S.

I scribbled this on the flight from Delhi to Jammu but it could be typed on my return this evening.

This book was published in Gujarati in 1980. It became a course book in S.N.D.T. Womens University of Bombay and was prescribed for two years as classic literature.

In 1980

I was not feeling well, so when I went to Bulgaria, it was suggested that I have treatment with mineral water in a sanatorium there for ten days. When I had all the medical check-ups done, the doctors diagnosed that I had some heart problem. At that moment the simple me fell in love with my heart. I remember the day, it was the sixth of October. I wrote two poems, one on the same night and the other the next night. The first poem was –

A complaint

*Oh deceitful! You my beloved.
You rule the breath, so how come you are tired
The masses can rebel but should you?
Oh deceitful! You my beloved.
At the first hint of death you got scared,*

*While I on your name have passed my whole life
 hearing the complaints of the world.
 Oh deceitful! You my beloved.
 What could be the fate of that tree;
 the fault of the branch,
 To have fallen in love with a bird like you,
 Oh deceitful! You my beloved,
 I don't insist on my world; if you want
 to yours I'll go.
 I love you, through the deserts of death
 you I'll follow,
 Oh deceitful! You my beloved.*

And the other Poem was the Processing

*I have come on a pilgrim to the river of my soul,
 I offer the sun in obeisance.*

*Churning this very river, this sun, I got
 And ever since, on my forehead the sun,
 I placed with care.
 Its my love for the sun that I give it
 away to the world.*

*I have come on a pilgrim to the river of my soul,
 I give the sun to obeisance.*

*I ask the river for a little water – to
 wash the hands of the world.
 So I could place the sun in the hands
 And say – go distribute the light everywhere
 I have come on pilgrim to the river of my soul,
 I give the sun in obeisance.*

*On a pilgrimage to the river I have come,
 To sprinkle my ashes, in my own river.
 Oh god! to what an enlightenment my madness
 has brought me;*

*I have come on a pilgrim to the river of my soul,
I offer the sun in obeisance.*

A Blank Sheet

On the 18th of October I returned from Bulgaria. And on the 26th of October in the early hours of the morning at 2 O'clock I received a phone call from Bombay saying that Sahir was no more – he had died of heart attack.

This was the night which turned to the night of twenty days earlier, when in Bulgaria, the doctors had told me about my heart problem. And it was the night I had written the poem and saw myself sprinkling my ashes, in my own river.

Suddenly I looked at my hands, these very hands had scattered my ashes, how did it happen that instead of my ashes they turned into Sahir's? This mistake was of death or of my hands?

It reminded me of the day when the first Asian Writer, Conference was held in 1956. Every writer and poet was given identification tag which everyone pinned on one's coat. Sahir had taken off his tag and pinned it on my own and taking my tag put it on his coat. Noting this somebody pointed out that we were wearing the wrong tags. Sahir had laughed and said may be the person who gave them the tags had made the mistake. We neither tried nor we wanted to try to correct the mistake. And after many years when I heard Sahir was no more than I felt that death had read that tag, the one in my name, pinned on Sahir's coat and had taken the decision.

No words came between our friendship. It was a beautiful relationship in silence. When the book containing the poems I had written on his love got the Akademi award, the press photographer wanted a photograph of me writing on paper. When they had gone away, I observed the paper and to my astonishment found that I had written only one word, Sahir, over and over again. I hadn't written it consciously but observing my madness I became conscious.

Soon, I was filled with anxiety at what a fateful day it would

be when my photograph scribbling his name would be in the morning newspaper.

The fateful day never came. The picture was published but the paper in my hand seemed blank.

It was another thing that with regret and remorse I saw the photograph. Why did the paper in my hand seemed blank when it wasn't so?

The dignity of a blank paper is even there today. I knew that Sahir did read this book which contained my love for him but after that neither I nor he ever mentioned this book.

I remember that once in a symposium of Urdu Poetry, when the programme had ended, many people went to Sahir to ask for his autograph. When I was the only one left I smilingly extended my hand like a blank piece of paper and he wrote his name saying, "On this blank cheque I have signed. Whatever the amount you want, fill it in and get it cashed." I knew it was the skin of palm that was fated to be an empty paper for no words could be written on it.

Even today there are no words. In this book whatever that has been written, even today in 1980, its the tale of an empty blank paper.

The beginning of this tale was silence and the intensity of it too was carried out in silence.

Forty years ago when Sahir used to come to see me in the Lahore days, he would come, silently smoke cigarettes and leave when the ashtray was brimming with cigarette butts.

And I would, after he was gone, light those cigarette butts. Our smoke mingled in the air as did our breath, the words of our poems too.

I am thinking that the air can cover any space. Earlier it used to cover the distance of our two cities, and today I am sure that it would be covering the space between this world and that world.

In 1983

This year too like the earlier put henna on my one palm, while the other writhed in pain from the blister given by it.

In 1982 Bhartiya Jnanpith had selected my book of poems "Kagaz Te Canvass" for the award. My son who was averse to marry again after his divorce, reversed his decision. At the end of the year he married a girl, very gentle in nature.

When 1983 started Jabalpur University honoured me with a D.Litt. degree. And it was the seventh of May, when I received a lawyers notice. I was aghast, the notice pertaining to my book of poems, which was recently awarded. The objections were about the poems regarding the nine dreams of Guru Nanak's mother, before the birth of Guru Nanak, in which I had hurt the religious sentiments and hence a criminal case would be filed against me.

No one must have experienced, as I did, the power of press, one that was pro and the other anti. The poem on which the issue was raised, was published in 1969. And now, after 14 years, the book which received the Jnanpith award, containing that poem was being considered objectionable. Many writers and newspaper had raised their voice in defence of the poem. This issue ultimately reached Longowal. The issuing of the notice was not in his knowledge. Without disclosing his identity, he gave a long interview in the Punjab edition of Indian Express, from which I came to know that a Punjabi newspaper had written many provoking articles for quite a few months. He said that some people who were jealous of Amrita Pritam, used the name of the religious institution to further their own goals.

Those days, how tense they were for me. The incident came to an end. I would like to quote from my diary published in 1984.

"It was the night of 14th May. In an half awakened, half asleep state, like a cry, the words came out "My Nanak, I have always imagined you but today I want to see you, the actual you – not from the figment of imagination but by these eyes of flesh and blood." How shrill the cry was I don't know but suddenly in front of my eyes a glow appeared and an electric current passed through me. No face appeared but I heard a very distinct voice. "Have you seen the proof you wanted?" And in the half awakened state I said, "Yes, I have seen it."

And it was the same 1983, when my grand-daughter Shilpi was born. On the 16th of December at Vishwa Bharti I received

from Indiraji the D.Litt. degree.

In 1984

This year from the point of view of my personal life and the fate of the country came as if a glass bangle had broken on the arm of culture, as if a pearl had fallen out from the ring of history.

Here I would like to quote a few paragraphs from my diary of 1984.

A Few Pages from My Diary

About a month back, on 20th September, there was a call from Prime Minister's House asking me to go there at 6.45 p.m.

That evening I spent more than an hour with Indiraji. She asked me how Indianization of our time could be possible as suggested by Shri Kailash Patiji. I told her that this could be properly answered by our scientists; I could only speak of the spiritual importance of new Indianized timings. But I was more worried about the forecast of an impending danger to her person.

"It is not danger only to my person, but to the whole country," she said, and remarked that great weaknesses had crept into our intelligence. Our laws were so much complicated and had so many loopholes that no right step at right time could be taken unhindered. Everything was lost in words. A word here and there on paper could upset the whole thing. The judiciary, the administration too, come up for comment along with security. She was upset and remarked, "I see darkness around."

And now when the light of the country is gone – O God, who is thee to listen to me, that the blot is on the conscience of our own people, and we are engulfed by darkness.

11.30 p.m. 31 Oct. 1984

It was 3 O'clock and still dark. I was not fully asleep, when all of a sudden there was light like dawn. This light kept rising and merging in the sky.

Then this light became stationary, out of which Indiraji's calm

smiling face emerged.

I cannot describe this experience in words. Her face was becoming one with light, but still it was prominent.

Then my eyes fell on the earth. There were several animals of the same height and structure. As if they were animals of the same species. They were looking around with wide open eyes.

I visualized in them anti-national forces conspiring. They were sitting like a group of conspirators.

This sight remained before me for quite some time. I was afraid that I would not be able to pin-point them in life, because they were all alike. I was not able to understand their language. But their looks spoke of some hidden conspiracy which said that our country was in danger.

Past midnight - 2 Nov. 1984

On the morning of 31st October, when she was shot by her own guards, what a shock she might have got? The words she uttered were: "What are you doing?"

What kind of faith she had reposed in the goodness of human beings that even when her body was riddled by bullets she could say "What are you doing?"

We can understand the pang. But incidents of loot and arson cannot be understood.

The people who dare commit such crimes are turning deaf ear to the very person who is again saying "What are you doing?"

I think whenever any wrong will be committed by anyone in this country if one has the power of hearing, one will be able to listen to her voice saying, "What are you doing?"

Indiraji is not the name of an individual, but it is the name of the conscience of this land, all lands.

Evening, 2 Nov. 1984

Who knows the secret of cosmic powers? I don't know how some waves of the imagination get in touch with those powers, or the threads of these powers come into contact with our mind; and become the spectators of ethereal dreams.

Last night I saw a thick forest in my dream. Under the shade of a tree. I saw a *Rishi* in trance. A divine woman, more like a fairy comes there. She leaves an year-old girl in front of the *Rishi*.

The *Rishi* is still in trance. The child starts playing with flowers and leaves. There is no one else around. But I hear a voice saying me: "The Indira you have known in the present is the pre-birth of the same of ancient times. She was born on this earth by an earthly saint and mother who was a divine woman."

I keep looking at the child absorbed in playing with flowers and leaves of the forest. I want to see in this child a resemblance to the person I know – when I wake up.

6 Nov. 1984

A realization dawned on me that Kailash Patiji mentioned only that a ruler has a right to start a new calendar who takes upon himself all the miseries and debts of his people. Such a person attained the position of a person beyond death. Kailash Patiji suggested to Indiraji that this was not the time to start a new calendar, but he added: "If you Indianize our time you will attain that calibre."

These are the two recognized procedures to be beyond death. I have strange feeling that Indiraji has adopted the third path by taking upon herself the violence of her people and has gone beyond death which is termed as "*Kaalijayee*".

Whether we fortunate people know it or not, but she has become "*Kaalijayee*".

7 Nov. 1984

Today I have been reading a hand-written letter which Indiraji wrote in reply to a complaint of mine. While talking to her I had said, "Why did you not come to the Bharatiya Jnanpith function? For me, more than the award itself, the award from your hand mattered."

She replied to me in words and action. She presented to me the D.Litt. degree of Viswa Bharati in December 1983. Before

that she wrote me a letter, dated 17 May 1983:

Dear Amrita,

The other day you come to see me. I felt very bad that I had not accepted the Jnanpith's request to give away this award. I did not think you would mind. How can I make up for this delay? You know or should know that you are one of my favourite persons, even though I have read a very small portion of your poetry. Apart from the beauty of thoughts and words, you have courage and that in my view is the basic virtue, for how can one be true to oneself or to any ideal without it?

With fond wishes,

Sincerely,

Indira Gandhi

I know I have the strength to be true to myself, but there is also a deep-rooted sadness which envelops me by untoward happenings around me. I have passed through this experience many a time. While facing the difficulties I have thought about Indiraji's courage. I was desperate today. To gain strength I read her letter several times.

When someone picks up a weapon, the first wound he inflicts is not on a human being, but on humanity. The first drop of blood shed is not of a human being but of humanity, and dead bodies lying on the roads are not human beings, but humanity.

18 Nov. 1984

It is the birthday of Indiraji. For me birth is reality, death is like a sound of water going away from the water.

Whom to tell that Indiraji is not the name of a person, that it is the name of the conscience of our land?

I feel like saying this on her behalf:

I am the ray of light, reflecting in the vast waters of the world.

*No one can touch the body of light.
 The paths mean nothing to me.
 You name the path, I will walk on it.
 This is the journey of the flow of light.
 If you wish, I shall be there.
 Paths mean nothing to me.*

19 Nov. 1984

A television team from B.B.C. recorded a programme, and talking about Indiraji, I explained the music of cosmic powers as scientific reality, and said, "The day when Indiraji was born, we don't know which ray of light and which cosmic music was engraved in her mind. But we know that this phenomenon gave birth to a vision of United India in her. And this was the vision she wanted all her people to share with her."

The night of the 27th – when I was asleep I heard some divine music and also heard a voice: "You talk about the music of cosmic powers, but you have never listened to this music. Now listen to it."

I saw a circle of light spreading across the whole sky revolving in a circle, constituted of small particles of light with music emerging from them.

Spell-bound I listen to this music. There is no one else in front of this circle. I feel as if I were also in the sky and the only witness of this sight. Someone tells me, "This is the moment you talked about, and here is the music when Indiraji was born."

Then the scene changes with the change in music. The circle of light changes into a circle of fire along with sounds of explosions. But all these sounds have a unique rhythm. This continuation of sounds and music captivates me when I again hear the same voice: "This is the same cosmic sound of music and sight of the moment when Indiraji was shot at."

All this changes itself into a vast sea, on the shore of which I am standing, looking at the sky, trying to listen to the cosmic music. The sound is receding in the distance; it is difficult to tell whether it is the sound of music or the sound of explosions.

I stood for a while on the seashore. The fading lights of evening turn into deep darkness, a vast expanse of darkness.

Now I withdraw from the seashore and start climbing up a road which leads to the parapet of a fort. Here I find hundreds of stairs going down. In the middle of these stairs I find her standing as she has come out from the room at the right. Seeing her, the tears well up in my eyes. I cannot utter a word. She looks at me and says, "Look, you are not to weep. You are to write about the cosmic music you have just heard and the sight you have just witnessed."

Still I want to say something to her but she disappears. There is no one in the stairs, they are empty, they are going down into the darkness.

27-28 Nov. 1984 at 1.30 a.m.

Time has compelled this me of flesh and blood to pass through the rigours of life but that pain has done the kindness that my soul had glimpses of that stage which can be called beyond time and space.

Before writing all this about my life, I had named my autobiography – "The Revenue Stamp", but the last few years experience has given a broader dimension to my truth, that's why I am changing the name of the book. I want to call it "Life and Times".

In this world full of hatred, the time that is left to learn, I feel if only I could see it as an onlooker. And with a cool mind be an alibi to the agony and ecstasy I am going through. That's why even to play with my two grand children is giving me satisfaction, while I put forth my inner experiences on paper.

Whatever, I have experienced through my dreams, those details are too long to tell perhaps I'll be able to expound all that in a separate book. All these writings of mine, are a relationship of the "red thread". A sect of Zenism, who had recognised psychic relationship with the supreme power, called themselves the "Red Thread Zens". Likewise I too want to call my new experiences a relationship of the Red Thread.

In May 1986, I was nominated to the Rajya Sabha, which has widened the scope of opportunities to express my thinking. But there are many things whose expression hasn't come to my lips. I am thankful to the AIR archives who have preserved a major part in my own words which after my death would be the last page of this book.

— From the autobiography *"Life and Times"*

Glimpses of Previous Births

IT was the year 1981 when suddenly I had a yearning to see my previous birth. I felt that all incidents in my life that occurred were connected with a place which I could not see – and long shadows of these incidents arise from that place and wrap themselves around me.

It was the conscious mind which thought that if I could detect some truth in the hidden folds of the earth then maybe I could be relieved from the anguish caused by the incidents that are occurring today.

There was a deep craving inside me to see as a spectator whether that had occurred in relation to me.

It was once again, the month of December when I met Shri Mrityunjya, the fervent longing of the mind at that time, came on the lips. So I told him, “I want to see my previous birth, but if I have to atonement do some *tapasya* for that then I won’t be able to do so. You could show it to me through the *Shaktipat* (your own power).

He laughed and said – All right but you’ll have to wait for a year. If it doesn’t come on its own then I’ll show it to you.”

A year passed. December of 1982, also passed. I didn’t meet him again, I was disheartened, low in spirits when in the begin-

ning of 1983, on the fifth January, I saw my previous life and that too how I dies and when I died.

Woke-up to find that I had completely forgotten the year which I had seen in the dream, only remembered the date, 29th December, the day I died.

I certainly saw the dream but a doubt remained in the mind whether it could have been the result of my feverish imagination. More than a year passed. The dream lay written in my diary. Nobody had read it till that moment except Imroz.

Then it was the year of 1984, 30th May when I met Shri Virendra Mago and the topic – whether humans have any past birth or not. In reference to the subject he said – “I can just now tell you about your earlier birth.”

For a short period he closed his eyes. I saw a shiver running through his body, especially around the eyes. And after opening his eyes what he told me was exactly like what I had seen on the night of 5th January, 1983.

I believed and felt – that my dream has turned out to be the truth. But may be a little bit of doubt lurked in some corner of my heart for when I went to Kerala – on 1st January, 1986 to deliver a speech at Shringeri-Math in Varkala. I spent the whole of the second day in Trivandrum with Kamala Das.

That day Kamala Das told me that the great saint Swami Mithran Namboodripad of Kottayam about whom you had written an article was in Trivandrum. I had to meet him and meet him I did. And on the next day, sitting alone with him, I asked him about my previous birth. I didn't tell him about my dream. He replied, “Just now I'll ask mother Mookambika and tell you.”

He touched my hand and closed his eyes. And after a while I saw tears falling from his closed eyes. When he opened his eyes he wiped off the tears with the back of his hands and said “Whatever Ma Mookambika has shown must be the truth but how am I tell you, what I saw”. I told him I wouldn't be frightened, so please tell me”.

So in a muted voice he told me. Your death was not a natural one.... I laughed and said – I know it all, could you now tell, how

it happened.

He said – “I saw a fire on one side which seems a symbol of revenge but on the other side, I could see water from which someone has filled a big cup of water. And then the colour of water has changed, as if someone had mixed something in it.”

Leaning his head forward, lowering it towards the ground he said – “After drinking the cup of that water you fell on the ground.”

I calmly told him – “I have seen all this in my dream. Please tell, who had offered me that cup of water?”

He touched my hand once again and closed his eyes. When he opened his eyes he said – “A woman gave it to you. There were three more women along with her, who had helped her on payment of a huge sum of money. The fifth was the maid servant who had given you the cup.”

I touched his feet and said – “I saw it exactly as you said. I remember the date but have forgotten the year. The date was the 29th of December.”

Surprised, he said – “Mother Mookambika has already shown you all this?” – And he continued – “In this birth you were born in 1919. Return back 51 years, it was the year 1868 when you died.”

There was another question in my mind which I couldn't find in my dream and that was where had I died? I had seen the place in the shape of a building. If I saw it today I would recognize it. But I don't know in which part of the country it was.

When I asked him, he described the same building which I had seen but he too couldn't tell me the location. He said – I haven't seen the whole of India that why I cannot recognize the area of that building but I can say that It wasn't the south. Anyway while doing *Pooja* if I see its name, I'll write and tell you about it.

Sahir

I have loved twice in my life first Sahir and then Imroz. I had seen Sahir first in a gathering of poets in the village, Preetnagar,

in the district of Amritsar. The details of the meeting are written in my autobiography 'The Revenue Stamp'. On the second day, after the conference we all had to return to Lahore. The bus we had to catch was from the nearby village Lopoki. We had to walk all that distance. And how much distance I covered while walking on the long shadow cast by Sahir I don't know. But for years to come I always felt that I was walking under his shadow.

It was that reality to this life which I lived and wrote. But I couldn't know that the shadow actually was of my past life.

I came to know this on the night of 5th January, 1983 when I witnessed my previous life. I saw the face of Sahir as that of the king of that palace, where on the 8th March I had walked in as his wife. And on the 29th of December, a woman gave me a cup of poison.

I got these dates from my dreams....

Today when these broken threads of life are coming together. I could perceive the reason for my love, for Sahir. In this realization, I wrote this poem when I first saw him—

*"Both worlds have become illuminated
Both my eyes have got back the lost light.*

I didn't know then why I had written that I had regained the light which I had lost. I never knew that this desire to be lost was there ever since 1868.

*My grief stricken eyes wept today
Before my feet the seven oceans lie.
My destination is on the other side.*

I could not connect the word "other side" with my past birth, nor the distance of the seven oceans to the distance of the past life.

In another poem I wrote—

*You couldn't untie the simple knot of love
I too couldn't untie the simple bond of love.*

I didn't realise while writing the poem that these knots we had

tied in our previous lives and even in this birth we could not undo this tie.

Another two lines from the poem—

*This world and that world tried their best to untie
God knows what strength these strands of thread have.*

I am surprised at how my subconscious mind stole a moment from my conscious mind to describe the terrible incidents of the past life, we tried to untie.

When I mentioned the two worlds “this” and “that” by ‘this’ I meant the people who killed and ‘that’ simply death.

Similarly here was another poem—

This night was such that the cloud of kindness continued to rain.

This night – went on to fulfil your promises....

The walls are too high – light cannot seen.

The night plays with dreams silently

Oh God! I didn’t realize while mentioning about the high walls that I was talking about the wall that rose between the two births and that no light could be seen from the other side.

In this birth there were no “promises” then which promises was I talking of in the poem....

When I had written the poem I didn’t know but now I know .

The whole poem I wrote in my dream. The first part of the dream is that I have high fever and Sahir has gently put his hand on my feverish forehead. Feeling the touch of his hand I opened my feverish eyes and said – “I thought you would never come”

And he said – “I knew that I would come .”

I have spent the whole night thinking of you.

I have just woken up building the seven heavens.

It was such a night that the cloud of kindness rained

This night – went on to fulfil your promises.

Thoughts like the flights of birds, came.

My lips drank the fragrance of your breath.

*High are the walls, the light cannot be seen.
The night plays dreams and says nothing more.*

And when I came out of the dream, I just had to put the poem down on paper....

Today I think it was God's grace that I had witnessed the moments when he made those promises to me, though I had written about it earlier but didn't realise their significance.

*"The month of your promises come and go.
Miles and miles of barren land.
And this month.
One hears the bells on the passing camel.*

And having seen the past birth I felt I have actually heard the bells with my very own ears.

I didn't know why I had written this. Was it for Sahirs' love?

*The earth sighed and the sky sobbed.
A caravan of flowers passing through the desert.*

While writing this I never realised I was writing about my past life. And I was referring to the night of my murder.

*What a night it was which hurriedly passed.
Flower like the moon under the feet got crushed.*

It was night of 2nd November, 1984 when I saw the whole sky spread out like an ocean. Waves of light rose from it.

I suddenly asked the waves – I want to see my previous life.

Goddess Saraswati came before my eyes. I stared for long at the spot, between her two eyes. While looking at the spot between her two eyes, I noticed something stirring in the centre of my forehead.

I asked the movement of my forehead I want to see my past birth.

Suddenly some high waves rose from the expanse of light *before me and some forms appeared on the waves. But the waves moved so swiftly that I couldn't recognize any figure. Lines kept*

appearing and disappearing on the waves.

Then suddenly I saw a pillar of white stone which stood immobile for a long time. And then I observed that there was a stone slab on the pillar on which my face was carved.

I carefully observed the slab when a sound struck my ear. The man you loved truly knew the intensity when you were no more.

Your poems were in the air... and in your memory he put up this portrait of yours. This pillar was in his palace.”

The voice continued, – “A palace woman hated you. She tried her best to get this stone carving removed but couldn’t. This pillar still stands there.”

I eagerly wanted to know where the palace was. But the question remained struck in my throat and everything then vanished.

When i woke up I was convinced that the artist who had carved that slab of stone was none other than Imroz.

My voice reaches Imroz in his room. I switched on the light and called Imroz. And said – “Look I saw a picture carved by your, which you even haven’t seen.”

Imroz

In this life, I had first met Imroz in 1956. After a couple of meeting a strange restlessness and a strange peace descended in my mind....

Twenty years ago I had a dream in which I saw a double storey house. Through one of the windows the forest in the back of the house could be seen and also the stream that flowed.

And near that window there is a canvas on which someone is painting....

This dream came at regular intervals in those long twenty years – but when I met Imroz – the dream never reappeared after that.

One felt that after twenty years of restlessness that itself -- away from the shadow -- acquired the mark of reality but I could not know that this intensity was not only of twenty years, but it was there from many births....

The meeting with Imroz gave such a knock on the door of my unconsciousness that I wrote a poem—

*Life don't close the door,
keep the honour of my patience.
Listen someone's footsteps are coming
from the desert.*

I didn't realise that this "desert" wasn't only a part of this life's empty years, this desert had a long history, it even belongs to those empty years of the earlier lives.

And when I wrote—

*Look up life!
Don't close your door!
Look up at least once!
Tying a ray round the head,
the sun has come again....*

I couldn't know the secret of the word "again" at that time.

They were only poems – which like drops of shapes rained on the paper but even-after writing—

*Rise and fill a cup of water from your vessel,
with it I will wash away the incidents
of the way side.*

— And I didn't know that the incidents which I wanted to wash away were of many births—

Then I had written a poem—

*Your look gave its hand in mine
In one meeting our longings
began to climb the years of life....*

At that time I didn't know the meaning of the word "years" and also that the steps lead down to the earlier lives....

— From the forthcoming book "*Lal Dhage Da Rishta*"
(*The Relationship of the Red Thread*)



ॐ नमो भगवते
पालीय वल्लभ
सुखं विष्णु व
केशं रेणुम

amrita pritam